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by

TOM ROAN

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CONTENTS

PAGE

GUN RAIDERS OF DEVIL RIVER — TOM ROAN — 8
Those two gun-hawks would go through a baptism of gun-fire hell for their pard—and a price!

TROUBLE AT SASSAFRAS BEND — LEON BYRNE — 44
Big Lem and Little Oakie didn't get what they asked for when they drank that six-gun toast.

COW COUNTRY SAVVY — E. W. THISTLETHWAITE — 55
A pictorial feature of cow country customs.

FIRE-HEADED FOOL — JAMES P. OLSEN — 56
Because he was suckled on six-gun flame and raised in a land of terror, Shasta Duane's courage was called foolhardiness—by the people who didn't know him!

UP THE LONG TRAIL — L. L. FOREMAN — 74
When does a boy become a man? Kinny Kincaid found out.

NO BOOTS AND SADDLES — WES FARGO — 84
Danny Carr was a neophyte in an owlhoot trade—until he was initiated by Eagle's horse-rustling gang.

CACTUS CITY GAZETTE — BRONCO BLYNN — 106
The newspaper whose editor has a nose for news—and gossip.

BOOTHILL'S BADGE-TOTER — GUNNISON STEELE — 108
Marshall Tal Brady knew there was only one answer to an owl-hooting challenge—

OLD TOUGH — S. OMAR BARKER — 118
A rangeland poem that has a moral.

SMART JIGGER — JOHN BENNET — 119
If Little Irby could savvy owlhoot—he'd lead the gang or die!

ADVENTURERS ALL — LEONARD DELANO — 125
Sea Lions and an Alaskan Storm.

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The plane did not carry fuel enough for the round-trip, so Havens went ashore at Port Jefferson and borrowed petrol from a motorist.

The return trip was thus so delayed that darkness overtook the "adventurers" on the way back. Spectators on shore lighted bonfires to guide them to a safe mooring. Night flying was a precarious undertaking in those days.

A PLAGUE OF PIGS

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Zealand the sheep growers have had to declare war on the wild pigs. These are the descendants of animals that have escaped and gone wild in the dense bush that still covers much of the hill regions in the interior of the islands. They fed there on roots and berries but as they increased in numbers they took to invading the farms and ranches. This in itself was bad enough but the animals had turned carnivorous and developed a taste for young lambs. As a result they have been outlawed and both the ranchers and the government have joined in a campaign to exterminate them. A reward of twenty-five cents is now offered for every wild pig killed.

THE PEBBLE THAT REVOLUTIONISED AFRICA

MANY of the world's great mines were discovered by chance, and in many cases, through ignorance, the discovery has been of no value to the man who made it. The South African diamond mines with their stupendous treasure, brought about £20 to the Boer farmer who was instrumental in unearthing their secret.

This man one day saw a native child gleefully playing with a small pebble that glittered and coruscated in the sun with unusual brilliance.

He took the stone from the child, examined it, and carried it home with him. He could have had but little idea of what the stone really was, for probably the only time he had ever heard of diamonds was when he had read the Old Testament. But a Boer has always a keen eye for business, and, thinking that the stone might have some commercial value, the farmer showed it to a British trader named O'Reilly.

O'Reilly seems to have recognised the stone immediately as a diamond, and bought it from the Boer—after considerable haggling—for about £20. Next he submitted it to Dr. Atherstone, of Grahamstown—an authority on mineraology—who unhesitatingly declared it to be a diamond of the purest water.

The diamond was then shown to Sir Philip Wodehouse, high commissioner of the Cape, and was bought by him from O'Reilly for £500.

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GUN RAIDERS

By TOM ROAN

If Bart Fargo and Oklahoma Sam would prove their friendship for the Paint Rock Kid by a baptism of gunfire and lead—then he would be confirmed in his owl-hooting faith and rest in peace in Boothill Heaven

CHAPTER I
Killer Lead!

THE three riders, halted in the timber just below the mouth of the pass, studied the valley intently. It lay lone and still, lighted by a weak little Montana moon hanging high over the Rockies, and shadowed here and there from broken clouds scurrying across the sky that gave it the awesome appearance of a great, yawning black hole gouged deeply into the earth from the dark-forested notch of Forlorn Pass to

OF DEVIL RIVER

The men lunged their horses forward when a bullet raked Mary Lou's mare and it plunged into the swirling stream.

the far-away mountain spurs and snow-capped peaks of Horse Heaven Divide, eighty miles to northward.

"And that's your Devil River Valley?"

The speaker spoke from the side of his mouth. The two pairs of bleak gray eyes to his right turned and looked at him and nodded listlessly in the darkness. Three nights ago they had met for the first time in more than a year, and there hadn't been much talk then.

Like fighting hawks on the wing, they had come to the meeting place at a lonely little ledge cabin more than ninety miles to southward. It had been a queer meeting down there in the black canyons and towering mountain crags of Music Box Gorge.

Neither had asked the other where he had been; neither had inquired about the other's health. They were men who talked little about their personal affairs. They trusted each other through hell and high water, the baptism of gunfire and lead, and that was enough.

Only Oklahoma Sam Bullard was old, a man already nearing sixty-five. Bart Fargo had just turned thirty. The Paint Rock Kid was twenty-eight. But each was a man with his record behind him, and each—at some time or place—had as many as a dozen rewards on his head and possemen burning saddle leather and gunpowder on his literally flying tail-feathers.

They were the last of the dreaded Old Death Larsen Gang, once more than twenty strong while playing out their own particular brands of hell and reckless damnation south of the Texas border and growing many painful thorns in the sides of certain overlord Mexican government despots. An army had hunted them. Paid two-gun killers and murderous women had double-crossed them. One by one they had dropped out of the picture, a simple mound in the sand marking the end of a life here and there in lonely out-trails where the wind blew free and the coyotes howled to the moon and the stars.

"Back up in the pass, I thought I heard the sounds of shots. Maybe my ears were playing tricks on me."

Bart Fargo was speaking again in his lazy Texas drawl. He was taller than either the Paint Rock Kid or Oklahoma Sam Bullard. He was even a trifle heavier, a broad-shouldered, dark-haired man, wind and sun-bronzed, as hard as saddle leather and as tough as sun-cured rawhide. He had those same bleak, gray eyes that were never still, always roving, shifty, quick and hard. Long holsters of hand-tooled Mexican leather slanted away at either hip.

"I maybe should not have asked you fellows to ride here with me, Bart." The Paint Rock Kid's bullet-scarred and deeply pockpitted face twisted into a mirthless grin as he spoke for the first time since they had halted. "But I needed some help when I heard that my old man and my kid sister are in a jam. It's damned little I've helped them in the past. The best thing I reckon I ever did for 'em was to let 'em think I was killed in a bank robbery job down in Utah eight years ago. I guess—"

"That'll do, Paint Rock!" cut in Fargo. "Enough's been said. Ride on. You know the way."

AN appreciative grin streaked the Paint Rock Kid's face as he prodded his tall bay with his spurs. They rode on, the sand in the old cattle trail deadening the sounds of the hoofs of their horses. In a few minutes they caught a glimpse of Devil River in the distance, a swirling and frothing stream tearing down through the timbered knolls and grass-choked flats to suddenly curve away in a rock-walled gorge that came to an end against the ragged black face of a mile-high cliff at the western side of the valley.

Fargo was staring at the river over the Paint Rock Kid's head and shoulders. He had heard a lot about that river, a lot about this Devil River Valley, one of the most rugged and beautiful valleys on the face of creation, and yet a place that had the reputation of being the most lawless and gunman-ridden hell-hole in all Montana.

He was looking at the river when the shots roared, when the lunging gashes of flames came spark-showering and double-thundering out of the darkness ahead of the Paint Rock Kid. He saw the Kid's horse rear and paw the air frantically; he saw the Kid crouch low over his saddle-

horn with one hand jerking for an instant toward the pit of his stomach, and then the Kid was making a wild leap to the left as the horse stumbled forward, let out one death-stricken bawl, and fell in a lifeless, blood-splattering heap in the trail.

It was hell, death and damnation in the graveyard suddenly on the rampage. There had been no word of warning, not the slightest hint of sound, just those double-thundering gashes of flame suddenly lurching out of a tall mass of rocks and a thick wall of bushes down there at an abrupt bend in the trail no more than forty yards away.

Fargo's high-tempered and long-legged black lunged to the left to hug the darker shadows. The man's dark clothes and the black horse made him almost invisible there in the darkness while Bullard's high-headed bay shot to the right and the old man's guns came roaring into action a split second later.

Bart Fargo was already firing, literally throwing lead with both hands. The Paint Rock Kid was huddled down against the bole of a tree barely three yards from the horse that had been shot from under him. The Kid's guns were out, his pain-wracked face a bloodless mask of torture reflected by the flashes of his shots, while Fargo kept working his horse farther back into the darkness until he was far enough away to head on down the slope at a wild, reckless gallop as he whistled one quick blast that found its way through the firing as a signal to Bullard that he was going to go beyond the rocks and attack the unknown men from behind.

He never got that far. As he jerked rein there in the trees, he heard a horse snort. For an instant he saw a mounted figure hanging low over a saddle-horn as a horse appeared in front of him to come plunging away from the lower side of the rocks and start a break-neck run down the slope. Fargo fired quickly, with only an aim that lasted no longer than the wink of an eye. At the crash of his heavy six-shooter a hoarse yell boomed out from the slope. The figure crouched over the saddle-horn of the running horse suddenly straightened. He was hidden then for a moment beyond the trees, but when he popped back into view, Fargo fired twice more. There was another yell at his first shot. None followed the second roar of the heavy Colt. He saw the man fling his hands skyward; he saw the man reel, rock backward, and then he was plunging like a tumbling sack of grain over his horse's rump as he fell headlong to the ground. He bounced as if made of rubber, and came to a rolling halt, a dead man lying in an ungainly bundle on the slope.

Another horseman tried to make his get-away from the rocks now. Bullard was raining lead on the place from some spot up there in the darkness, making it too hot for the killer to stay there in a position that was a shelter and advantage only a few moments ago.

Fargo saw the man trying to get away. He saw him running along the side of a galloping horse for five or six paces before he vaulted himself into the saddle, and then he was gone, racing down through the timber with Fargo again whistling and taking out after him with his big rowels hard-pressed in his black's ribs.

FARGO passed close enough to the rocks for the pale moonlight to reveal there were no other horses behind him. That meant there were only two of the killers, and he whistled another signal to Bullard, halting the man's firing as he shot on down the slope, giving his sure-footed black full rein while his

booted heels pressed the steel harder and harder against the horse's sides.

An opening in the timber showed ahead. As Fargo reached the edge of it he saw the horseman ahead of him just entering a thicket of low pines on the other side of the clearing. He kept on, swinging himself down on his running horse's side like an Indian leading a battle charge. He struck the pines, expecting gashes of fire to come lunging out of them, but hammering hoofs ahead told him that the rider was going on, riding with that same hell-bent, reckless fury that had marked the beginning of the wild race.

Crashing through low limbs and brush, Fargo struck another slope, one that now led him to the floor of the valley. Once more the timber came to an end. A long, level flat lay in front of them now, and the man ahead seemed to be riding straight toward the curling arm of Devil River.

Fargo fired at him with a quick-triggered fury. The man turned in his saddle and fired back, but the running horses made a good aim impossible. Then, to Fargo's surprise, he saw the rider ahead come to the high, smooth-rock bank of the river. The man's horse shied and tried to turn back, but the man spurred and quirted the animal unmercifully while Fargo triggered three or four more shots at him. Then, mastering his snorting animal, the man ahead was in the air as his horse made one wild, desperate leap. The horse and rider were gone then, flashing out of sight with splashing water whipping high around them and closing over their heads.

It looked like suicide to Fargo when he left his horse a few rods from the river and cautiously hurried on afoot with his big guns filling his hands. He crept to the very edge of the river bank, removed his hat, and peered at the water. It was a dozen feet straight down to the surface of the water, and the stream ended there to his left in a big, round whirlpool swirling against the foot of the jagged wall of the black cliff.

The rider and the horse could not possibly have escaped. Any man could have seen that with one glance at the stream. Nothing could fight against that swift current down there, and as Fargo moved farther along the bank of the stream, he saw there was no possible way for a man to leave the river, once he was into it at the point where the man had jumped his horse from the bank.

He turned back after a few minutes and his face was screwed into a frown. He was still puzzled, unable to figure this thing out. Half-way up the slope he met Oklahoma Sam Bullard coming along with the nearly limp and almost helpless form of the Paint Rock Kid clinging to him behind the cantle of his saddle.

"I got a look at the other duck," explained the old man. "A half-breed of some sort. You double-leaded 'im, Bart. One slug caught him below the heart. The other split his head like an axe. Where'd yore other killer rat go?"

"In the river!" Fargo's voice was curt and tense with excitement. "Looked like suicide, but something tells me that it was not. How's Paint Rock?"

"Fair to middlin', maybe," grunted Bullard, but a wink from his right eye told Fargo that he was lying. "Let's get him to where we can look him over an' sorter patch 'im up."

"It's all right, friends." A bloody-toothed grin streaked the Kid's face a short time later as Fargo rolled a cigarette and gently placed it between the bright red lips. "I know what's comin'. We three have been there before. We've seen a lot of good friends check out, and I lied to them

to try to cheer them up just like you're tryin' to lie to me. Only it doesn't work." The grin widened. "I know when the game's over. You'll take my watch, Bart, the chain and the big locket. My saddle and bridle is yours, Sam. You'll take my money belt, Bart. Take it to the old man and Mary Lou. Show 'em the watch and that locket on the end of the chain. They'll know that they came from me. It was handed down from my granddad. He lost his eyesight blasting for gold in California. That's why it's a blind man's watch with all the bells and chimes. Mary Lou will understand."

"Only, Paint Rock," Fargo answered gently as he squatted there beside him with his finger on the Kid's pulse, "you've never even told me your true name."

"That's right." Again that bloody-toothed grin streaked the Paint Rock Kid's face. "I wondered for the first year or two how long it'd take you to get around to asking my right name, and then after that I kind of forgot about your not askin'. My right handle is Johnny McBride. In these parts they used to call my old man Fighting Bill McBride. If the rustlers haven't cleaned him out, you'll find the old homestead at the fork of this river, up Iron Tail Canyon. The mouth of the canyon is above us. Straight across from the mouth of it is Jerkline, the town I've been telling you about . . ."

THEY entombed him just before daylight. It was his last wish. He had laughed and joked until the end, and he was level-headed and clear-eyed until it came.

"I reckon Dad and the kid won't take it too much to heart," he had told them, lying there drawing away at another cigarette. "They won't know that I was coming back. They still believe that tale, I guess, about my cashing in my chips in the Utah bank deal. Tell them any kind of a lie you like."

It had been the last thing he had said. A shudder had swept over him. Neither Fargo nor Bullard could tell whether it was pain or laughter that had shook his chest for the last time. They found a hole there in the cliff, a round one almost as straight as the bore of a gun. It ran straight back in the rocks and it was just large enough to slide the body into it. Afterwards they walled it up with stone, and sealed the cracks in the rocks with mud. It was the end as far as the Paint Rock Kid was concerned.

"And what about the dude back up there on the slope," demanded Bullard when the work was done. "Leave 'im lyin' where he dropped?"

"Yes!" Fargo had ordered. "Just go back up there and get the Kid's saddle and bridle like he told you to do. Then come back here and let me have the pleasure of seeing you throw your old rig in the river."

"It's been a powerful good rig in its time," grumbled the old man thoughtfully.

"So was Nero's fiddle!" Fargo half-smiled. "Go on and get that rig. Something tells me that we need to get the hell out of this spot."

Bullard left him after that. He was gone for twenty-five or thirty minutes. When he returned he was riding the Paint Rock Kid's saddle, and the Paint Rock Kid's bridle was on his horse's head.

"I couldn't think of throwin' my old rig in that river, Bart," he grumbled. "Why, it'd be too much like throwin' an old friend away. Come on, let's ride. Danged if I can't almost see the Kid's spirit standin' here grinnin' at us."

Fargo mounted, and they rode on in the growing light with neither of them aware of a pair of dark eyes watching them with the intensity of a fighting eagle's from the top of

the cliff straight above the place where the river spun the big whirlpool at the foot of the black rocks.

CHAPTER II
Blood and More Blood!

IRON Tail Canyon Ranch was in no mood for visitors, and certainly not in the happy frame of mind to receive a pair of rank strangers, each with a stamp and bearing of a two-gun fighting man clearly upon him. The Iron Tail Ranch had seen too many gunmen come and go.

For thirty-five years Fighting Bill McBride had bred and raised the finest saddle horses to be found anywhere within a three-hundred-mile circle. He had fought rustlers and horse-thieving Indians, and always before now he had battled them all to a perfect stand-still, killing those who were arrogant and self-sure enough to face his guns, and driving the rest from the country and making them wish they had kept out of Montana altogether.

The grass in Iron Tail Canyon was second to none. For forty miles the canyon streaked its way back in the sky-reaching hills, and growing in width until it was a full twenty miles wide. Its walls were high and smooth. For many years not one of the fine Iron Tail horses had been branded; and they were noted far and wide as the steel-dust stock of all the rangelands, so near to thoroughbreds they bowed their heads to none, not even to the far-off Kentucky bluegrass strains. A few wire gates here and there had been enough to keep the animals in the canyon. A man had needed no brand in a place like this, but of late it was costing Fighting Bill McBride a price close to his life's blood. A war with the boldest rustlers he had ever seen had been fought here last night.

McBride was a tall man with bushy, iron-gray hair, bristling mustaches and a graying goatee that clung to his firm, stubborn chin in a broad V. At his lean hips were his old black-butted .45's, weapons that had been with him through many a gun-ruckus; and his temper was short this morning, his words clipped out and straight to the point when anybody dared to speak to him.

He stood on the end of the vine-covered and flagstoned north porch where empty cartridge shells still lay underfoot. The panes of the window at his left shoulder were spider-webbed with an endless assortment of bullet holes. In the ancient logs of the old house, dozens of rifle bullets had buried themselves in the hard-seasoned and time-weathered wood.

It was like that down there under the time-blackened cottonwood beam of the big gate of the main corral; and inside the corral four fine brood mares lay dead, each mare due to bring her high-priced colt into the world in early fall, and each mare killed by stray bullets in a battle that had been fought to a standstill through three hours of hard fighting during the night; and in one of the north stables—as if just to make a man's heart pain like a jumping toothache—a thousand-dollar stallion lay dead, killed by a needle-pointed, copper-jacketed bullet that had come in through one of the cracks in the old pine logs to tear out the top of the animal's head.

A grimace twitched McBride's proud lips as he turned away from the scene that lay in front of him, and something like an invisible hand of ice seemed to grip him at the pit of his stomach and making him sick from the ends of his toes to the top of his dead. He stared at the big cottonwoods surrounding the main house in a grove. Even the trees bore the marks of the fight, and the half-

open front door looked as if it had been stabbed in a dozen places where a hail of buckshot had sent splinters flying in a rattling downpour all over the livingroom.

The bunkhouse had already commanded his attention. He had been down there at daylight, and the dadburned bunkhouse was an infernal butcher shop—and nothing short of just that! Out of the eight men trying to ride and fight for him right here in sight of the house, four of them were in their bunks, one with a bullet hole through his left shoulder, another with his leg in splints and bandages, another with an arm that would never bend at the elbow again, and the fourth with holes made by a bullet that had entered his mouth an inch below the left cheek, where it had torn out six perfectly good teeth, and had departed through the right side of the mouth. Men on guard farther up the canyon would have to be brought in if another one of those desperate night raids came.

BLOOD and more blood! Blood and damnation's blood! God A'mighty, would it never end! He swore violently and desperately as he walked up and down the broad, cool porch.

"And no law in Jerkline," he growled. "No law except that which fits the needs and pocketbooks of four or five dirty damned lawyers, and a rat-eyed sheriff to do their gunning for them while they sit back out of danger, shyster lawyer fashion!"

"Well, is there anything new about it, Dad?" demanded a voice in the doorway behind him. "I thought it was a story so old that it smells to Heaven when you merely mention it."

He whirled and looked at the girl who had appeared there in a neatly starched blue calico dress. She was tall and slender and fair-skinned, her eyes wide and blue, and her hair that color that had always reminded him of a glowing, yellow-gold sunset. He looked her up and down, keenly, with a quick, fierce glint in his own blue eyes.

"You look as fresh," he growled, "as if you had slept in God's pocket instead of living through hell here with me and the men all night. I don't understand it. How do *you* account for it, Mary Lou?"

"I don't account for it," she told him quietly. "I just stand for it because there is nothing else to do. We who learn to drink the devil's blood should not reject the meat. Would it make you—er—want to fight," she hesitated, "if I told you that breakfast is on the table and that Old Wing is patiently waiting for you to come and eat?"

"I ain't hungry!" he snapped at her. "How in the hell can a man be hungry after what went on here last

night! The whole damned canyon blazing with guns, lead flying all over hell and creation, four of my best brood mares as dead as hell, and that fine stud killed so quick he never knew what hit him! No, damn it, I ain't hungry! I ain't thristy! I ain't *nothing!* I am mad at you, and I am mad at myself, at the sky and earth—at even the air I breathe! Dammit, I am so mad I can't get any madder, and that makes me mad as hell! I— Say, who the bald-headed devil is that coming up the canyon?"

"It looks like two riders." The girl had glanced down the canyon. "I would say that the animals or beasts sometimes known in very quiet and very polite circles as horses, and the riders are another species of animals sometimes called men."

"And what in the hell does that explain, young one?" He looked at her with a new fire suddenly kindling in his eyes. "They look like a couple of bohunks to me. A couple of jaspers maybe looking for some place to get the wrinkles taken out of their bellies. Maybe it's some more of that damned rustler breed coming here and thinking they're going to get a job so they can quietly slip a knife between my ribs when I'm not looking—and then tell me when I catch them at it that they were only trying to hide it. I'd like to see anybody ask me for a job this morning. I'd take a heap of delight in cutting his throat from ear to ear just to get a look at the color of his dad-blasted blood."

"They're strangers, Dad, an old man and a young one!"

"Do you think I need a spy glass to see that?" he growled. "Each packing a couple of guns, too, and one looks so old I'll bet he couldn't hit the ground with his own hat, let alone with a bullet from a gun! I'll do the talking. As usual, I'll ask you to keep your mouth quietly and politely *shut*. As usual, you *won't*. Never do. Never will. It must be that Hatfield blood and useless bazzoo in you from your mother's side."

He waited impatiently, studying each rider as the men grew closer. He watched them turn up the slight rise toward the hitchrack. There was something about the way the younger man sat his horse that he could have liked if he had been in a better humor. But there was something about the older man that he did not like at all. He was a little too seedy looking, and those big guns there at his hips were only a bluff! Dang-it, he had said that man was too old to hit the ground with his hat, and said it when the fellow was a mile away. He didn't like men who wore guns as a bluff, and he didn't like any man who chewed tobacco and allowed it to drool from the corner of his mouth and seep down his chin.

"The old one," he grumbled half to himself and half to the girl, "looks like the grandpa of Santa Claus, and I wouldn't bet more than thirty cents in lead nickels on the other one."

"I like the looks of both of them, Dad."

"You would," he grinned wickedly out of one side of his mouth at her, "just to be contrary."

THE riders came on. They rode straight to the old, log hitchrack, and pulled rein, bringing their jaded looking horses to a tired halt. The younger man was the first to lift his hat. The old man seemed a little confused. He lifted his hat as if sorely out of practice. He fumbled it, and almost dropped it. Then the younger man was swinging out of his saddle and tossing his reins across the log. The old man hesitated awkwardly, and followed the younger man's move stiffly. Once with his feet on the ground, he placed both hands on his back over his kidneys, and straightened himself with a groan.

"Good morning!" boomed McBride. "What, if anything, can I do for you?"

"Good morning." The younger man was coming forward, big hat in his hand, his chaps whisking, long-shanked spurs dragging, heavy six-shooters rocking loosely at his hips. "I take it that you are Mr. McBride?"

"I've been called that, yeah." There was decided unfriendliness in McBride's tone. "Since my daddy died, anyway, and if it's any right refreshing news to you, who are you?"

"The name probably wouldn't mean anything," answered the man, coming to a halt with his hat still in his hand. "However, it's Fargo, and my partner's name is Bullard."

"Go Far and Lard Bull, huh," the hint of an incredulous little smile trembled the corners of McBride's mouth. "Likely names, but I might repeat the first question I asked you. What do you want?"

"Well, maybe in the first place," began Fargo, "we're looking for a job."

"I ain't hiring strangers!" A quick, dangerous glint lighted McBride's eyes. "There are people in Jerkline," his eyes narrowed quickly, "who make a specialty of it. Much obliged. I don't need you, don't want you, and don't like your looks nohow. The distance down the canyon is the same as coming in. I'll thank you to close the wire gate as you go out of Iron Tail proper."

"Now wait a minute, Dad!" The girl had taken a few steps forward. "This is no way to talk to anybody. I'm sorry!" She looked straight at Fargo, and then glanced quickly at the old man behind him. "We've had a great deal of trouble here. Dad—Dad is all upset. I'll ask you to excuse him. He—he is not exactly responsible for himself this morning."

"You get back in the house!" McBride reached forward quickly and caught her roughly by the arm. "I'll do my own thinking, my own cussing, young one, and my own fighting if a need of it arises and comes!"

"I have heard," growled Bullard, drawing himself up as stiffly-straight as a ramrod, "that you claim to be powerful handy at the latter. Only we didn't come here for either a fuss or a fight, Mr. McBride. We come, like my friend here says, to maybe kinda talk a little while, maybe to kinda stick around if you thought we might be of some help to you. I reckon you ain't shorely as big a plain, buzzard-headed damned fool as you look an' act. I'm ridin' a saddle—"

A quick glance from Bart Fargo halted him, making him realize that he was about to say too much. He stepped back like some half-shamed youngster, and glanced up and down the canyon as if suddenly forgetting what he was going to say.

"I ain't mean to men just because I want to be mean. You men can get that straight here and now."

McBride was coming off the porch slowly, big hands opening and closing. The girl followed him, left hand on his right arm, a look of fear in her eyes. No one could tell what Fighting Bill McBride would do in his present temper. He paused two yards away from the younger man, planted his booted and spurred feet firmly, and hooked his thumbs over the broad silver buckles of his black belts, the arrogant glint still in his eyes, right side of his mouth twitching with hard-held anger about to break from him in a quick-tempered volley of hot words.

"I try to be neighborly when I can," he went on, "but we hire no more strangers in Iron Tail. Everybody knows I don't when I can help myself otherwise. I ain't done it in the past when I could get around it. I ain't doing it no more in the future. I ain't wantin' to be just plain mean, as I said. What I'm tryin' to tell you—what I'm tryin' to tell you—"

He paused suddenly, his eyes narrowing and becoming curious pinpoints. The younger man had taken something from his pocket, something that glittered with a yellow gleam in the morning sunshine. He lifted it to his right ear, a watch chain and a heavy gold locket hanging from it. He pressed something with his thumbnail. Faint but strangely sweet sounds of chimes came with a soft, gentle ringing from his hand.

Fighting Bill McBride moved on, his eyes widening, circles of paleness blanching his cheeks. His big hands reached out like the feeling and clutching hands of a blind man. They clamped themselves on the younger man's shoulders. In a voice that was like an awed whisper, he spoke.

"Where—where did you get that—that watch?"

As if a distant voice was answering him, as if it had waited all this time to speak, a rifle crashed on the north rim of the canyon, the sound coming from a distance of six hundred yards away. A bullet whistled through the air, passed on and smashed into the jamb of the living-room door.

McBride leaped back as if Fargo had struck him a blow with his fist. The man's hand flew to the right side of his face, and bright-red streaks of blood glowing and sheening in the sunlight came oozing through his fingers where a bullet had grazed his cheek.

NEITHER Fargo nor Bullard knew the exact meaning of it; they could not have possibly known, but here was a broad-open daylight renewal of the war that had raged during the night; and here was a man with blood oozing from his cheek from a would-be killer's rifle on the rim.

There was but little time for anything other than to seek shelter as quickly as possible. McBride and his daughter darted back into the house with the girl leading the way and the men heading for their rifles. Fargo and Bullard snatched their rifles from their saddles, and followed them. They banged into the living-room with their spurred heels ringing and McBride still holding open the door for them.

In another minute—with everybody trying to shout orders at the same time—Iron Tail Canyon was ringing with shots. The men in the bunkhouse, even three of the wounded, had come to life to join it; and even Wing Lee Toy, the smiling-faced Chinese cook, was taking it upon himself to try the merits and long-distant shooting qualities of an old Winchester from a kitchen window.

It was fairly close quarters here. The canyon was no more than twelve hundreds yards across at this point. The river forked only a thousand yards below the houses and corrals, each fork of the stream hugging the foot of the canyon walls, and from either rim of the canyon ringing and crashing of shots were making themselves known, the bullets whistling, slapping into the log walls and crying through the cottonwoods.

"They ain't expecting to make a big showing!" bellowed McBride, slamming more cartrides into his rifle. "It's just to let us know they're still around and going to give us the works the next time. Meaner devils never blew out of hell than these people doing the rustling these days in these parts. They stop for nobody and not a thing, but this won't last long. You wait and see."

He was right about that. In five minutes the canyon rims had become quiet. Not the slightest sign of a man or horse was stirring up there in the thickets of low jackpines. Save for that small bullet mark on Mc-

Bride's right cheek, no damage had been done, though Fargo did find a bullet hole through the cantle of his black's saddle when it was safe enough for him to venture outside. Then Bullard found where a bullet had nicked his saddle horn, and that showed them that the rustlers had deliberately tried to kill their horses.

"Of course they did!" agreed McBride as he afterwards led the way for them to the corrals and stables. "Anything to be mean! Anything to be lowdown, rotten and dirty! Anything to try to grip me to my knees! And that shows you the stripe of humanity they are. Very few rustlers I've ever seen or heard of would deliberately kill a horse. They value horses about as much as anybody I know of. But we'll get these plugs of yours in an inside stable and away from danger. They look all tuckered out and in need of a good feeding. After that we'll talk."

CHAPTER III
Bloody Justice!

FARGO and Bullard unsaddled the animals, and McBride fed the horses himself, giving them as much grain as he dared to give any horse, and then, with four men coming out of the bunkhouse to stare at them, he led the way back to the house where Mary Lou McBride and Old Wing Lee Toy were placing a much-delayed breakfast for them on the livingroom table instead of the diningroom.

"I thought it best to eat in here away from the men this morning," the girl told them, slipping the last cup and saucer in place. "I believe there will be a great deal of talk that should be kept among ourselves, for the moment at least."

"It was very thoughtful of you," Fargo nodded, glanced toward the closed door leading to the diningroom. "Paint Rock insisted that I keep the watch. Said it was a handdown from his grandfather. I promised him that I would keep it—for a time, anyway. He sent you this, and I might as well give it to you now as any other time."

He took the Paint Rock Kid's broad, heavy money belt from inside his shirt, and laid it on the table. Fighting Bill McBride leaned forward and looked at it. There was dried blood on the belt, and McBride's face twisted itself into a puzzled frown.

"Who is Paint Rock?" he demanded, bluntly. "I never heard of him until you mentioned the name."

"The Paint Rock Kid and Johnny McBride were the same," answered Fargo, evenly. "We were friends for a long time."

"So!" McBride's blue eyes widened, then narrowed, the one word coming like a whisper, the others that followed scarcely any louder. "And—and that means that you and your pard belong to the long trail wild bunch?"

"Among other things," Fargo's voice was low but steely hard as if he had no liking for the blunt question, "I've sometimes been accused of that, yes."

"You—you ain't the fellow who left here with my Johnny?" A hard, mean gleam had come into McBride's eyes. "Your name wasn't at one time Lape Lassiter, was it?"

"Hardly—if you ever saw Lassiter." A wicked little grin flicked the corners of Fargo's mouth. "He was big and dark, with close-lying curly black hair, if he's the same Lape Lassiter I saw the Paint Rock Kid with down on the Mexican border a few years ago, and right after, I believe, that the Kid killed a sheriff and a deputy one night in a gun ruction in your town of Jerkline."

"Johnny didn't kill the sheriff and that deputy!" snarled McBride with sudden anger. "Johnny only thought he did! Somebody shot them both through the window when the fight was going on in the back gambling room of the Squaw Saddle Saloon. We found all that out at the inquest, but was never able to get anybody to listen to us. Both men were shot with rifle bullets, I tell you! The bullet holes were there in the panes of the window. All the rest was a lie! A *damned lie,* I tell you!" He gripped the edge of the table with his big hands, his face having become bloodless with his rapidly mounting rage. "As dirty a lie as ever blew off the bald face of hell!"

"Wait, Dad!" The girl caught him by the arm, her own face suddenly drained of all its blood. "These men can't be responsible! They only came here—"

"And said that my Johnny did that, yeah!" barked the man. "Said it to my teeth—"

"We only know," cut in Fargo, quietly, "what the Paint Rock Kid told us about it, Mr. McBride."

"He was no Paint Rock Kid!" boomed McBride. "He was Johnny McBride, my boy, the one that damned Lape Lassiter took off with him an' his string of hellions. A woman helped, damn her soul! A pretty, black-haired, mink-eyed, little half-Mexican she-cat making love to a boy not quite eighteen years old! A pretty devil whanging her guitar every night in her man-trap cabin behind the Squaw Saddle and driving him crazy with fool puppy love every chance she got to slip her arms around him!"

"I know nothing about all that." Fargo's voice was gradually hardening, the bleak gray eyes narrowing. "I only knew the owner of this watch as the Paint Rock Kid, a boy who had hit the trail and had gone on the bad when he ran into me. I'm only trying to help out, trying to do what he asked me to do, McBride. You don't need to snarl and yell at me like I'm some damned dog!"

"When did you see Johnny last?" snapped McBride. "When did you see him last?"

"This morning, Bill!" put in a voice from the opening front door. "He and his pard there killed him down at the big whirlpool of Devil River in Devil River Valley."

They whirled from the table quickly, each startled by the quick harshness of the voice. A tall man in a red-checked shirt, a broad-brimmed black hat, gray trousers and black boots stood in the doorway. Two heavy .45's filled his dark hands. An eight-ball star glittered like an evil eye on his black calfskin vest.

"Steady!" He spoke with a hiss. "The windows are covered, too, if you'll only take the time to look. Stranger, I arrest you and your pardner for murder. I arrest you for the murder of Johnny McBride this morning just before daylight in Devil River Valley. I also arrest you for the murder of a man known in these parts for the past few months as Rio Juan. If you move a muscle or as much as blink an eye, you'll be shot down—just like you two shot down this man's son after killing Juan on the north slopes of Forlorn Pass. Come on in, boys!" He called that back over his shoulder. "It looks like the jig's up for a couple of strangers. Steady, damn you! I'm no man to take chances with your kind!"

"DON'T try it, Sam; we can't shoot this out." Bart Fargo spoke just in time as men began relieving him of his heavy gun belts and expert hands started searching him and the older man, digging into their pockets and the rest of their clothing to make certain they were not carrying hide-out weapons.

"Remember, Paint Rock's sister is here." Fargo added that when handcuffs were being clamped on their wrists. "Take it easy. There's plenty of time."

Tension held the room after that, growing in intensity every moment. Men kept sidling in at the door, their guns out, nervous fingers on their triggers. Like well-oiled automatons they slipped along the wall, their eyes watchful, nostrils quivering, a marked paleness in their faces. Afterwards, Fargo was to know that they had come up along the river, shielded by the yet rocky-walled banks of the stream above the ranch houses, and following the north fork of the madly scurrying waters. Not until they had been less than five hundred yards away had they broken cover, coming forward in a scattered-out mass, twelve of them, all wearing badges. The main house had been surrounded completely, taking everybody by surprise. Now the man in the checkered shirt was speaking again:

"You might get away with a lot of things down among the Mexicans, but you can't do it here, Fargo." He laughed harshly, a man so cocksure of himself. "Twenty-four hours ago you stopped in a sheep camp, or, rather, were just leaving one. News of your coming traveled ahead of you, like certain little items of news has a way of doing in these parts now and then. Jerkline makes short work of your stripe. Bill McBride will yet have the pleasure of seeing you dangling on the end of a rope. I guess you know what I mean."

"Sure, I know." A nervous little laugh came from Fargo. "I've met your kind before, just like, probably, you've met mine. The good old law! I love it so well I can taste it!—Easy, Sam. Take it easy. Let this duck play out his string."

Fighting Bill McBride hadn't said a word. He stood there like a man dumbfounded, like a man not knowing what to say, his puzzled gaze traveling from the sheriff of Jerkline to Fargo. He turned slowly, looked at his daughter, and then back at the sheriff. Fargo was conscious of a smoldering blue-hell beside him when he glanced again at Oklahoma Sam Bullard.

The older man stood stiffly-straight, as emotionless as a granite wall, and yet there was something in his face, something in the cording muscles along the backs of his hands, that smacked of lightning about to let loose and tear everything around him to shreds. Talking more to Bullard than anybody else, Fargo's voice came again, low and half-guarded, a man speaking as if trying to soothe a dangerous horse:

"We've still got time to play several trump cards in this things." He laughed softly. "All we have to do is to use our heads. A lot of people can't do that in a jam. It takes horse sense and plenty of it, to know when you are licked on the jump-start of the draw. Now and then people sometimes like to kill to get others out of their way."

He hoped that would take effect, and out of the corners of his eyes he saw that it was taking effect. Bullard had relaxed, and he saw that McBride was relaxing.

McBride had taken a step backward from the table. A cynical grin was on his face. It vanished after a moment, with men still coming into the room, their six-shooters out, nervous thumbs on the hammers of the weapons, itchy fingers on the triggers. Then McBride's voice came, low and emotionless, carying no anger in it at all:

"And these men killed my Johnny?"

"That's right!" The man with the eight-ball star on his vest laughed mirthlessly. "In cold blood, about the coldest I've ever heard of. But

don't start anything, McBride. Leave everything in my hands. The law will take its course. These two will look a damned sight better dangling on the end of a rope than they will with you trying to promote a fight with them."

"Maybe I ain't even trying to start a fight!" A low, angerless chuckle filled the room as McBride stepped back from the table, again hooking his thumbs over the broad buckles of his belts. "Maybe I'm sorter appreciating your coming, Jasper Hutch. You're making us such a very fine sheriff of Jerkline. I know that you *like me*. I know that you are *trying to protect* me. Just as the sheriff of Jerkline should!" A nervous high-strung splatter of laughter came from him. "Of late, my fine horses have been run off, right in front of my eyes, right under my guns. It has looked like people have driven them off only to kill them. But I guess I've said enough about that, counting the many times I've come to Jerkline to report my troubles to you. You say my Johnny is dead. I thought he was dead years ago. I'll be much obliged to you if you will go ahead and just finish what you started to say."

JASPER HUTCH told his own story about it. It had all the earmarks of having been carefully rehearsed. Fargo listened, knowing that it could not have been anything else. He watched Bullard, silencing the old man several times with a shake of his head when quick words seemed to be trembling for expression on the tip of the old man's tongue.

"And you'll find the body right there in the rocks," Hutch was finally finishing. "I've got a man there on guard, a good man who will see that nothing is disturbed until you get there."

"But you ain't told him how you got all yore information!" shot in Bullard in spite of Fargo's continued dark scowls to silence. "You ain't told him half the straight of it; ain't told him that his Johnny was killed with a shotgun—with *buckshot* while we two are carryin' only rifles an' six-guns!"

And then, cursing and snarling, a man who could no longer contain himself even if it brought both roof and rafters down on him, Bullard told everything. He spared nothing. He said things that brought snarls from the men along the wall; things that made hands suddenly tighten on the butts of guns and quick eyes dart their danger-filled glances from face to face.

"Johnny—as his daddy here calls 'im—didn't want us to bring his body here!" He barked that at them. "It was his last request, an' we listened to it. He said it'd be easier on his daddy an' sister. He didn't know he was shot with a damned double-barreled scatter gun either! I found the hellfired thing up there in the rocks when I went back for his saddle. I didn't even mention it to Bart until he was ridin' on here. An' we figured it all out, too. Them men was planted there on the slope. Planted there for a damned good reason. Men was here tryin' to run off hosses—they was there on the slope to watch for us or anybody else who mighta spoiled their rustlin' deal. They—"

"That'll do, Sam!" Fargo's voice rose like a shot to drown him out. "Don't be a fool! What's wrong with you! Haven't you sense enough to tighten that tongue?" His eyes blazed at Bullard.

But it was one stormy session after another until they got him out of there. Their horses were saddled and brought up. Even Jasper Hutch seemed to have all his interest centered on getting them away from there as quickly as possible.

THEN came the long ride into Jerkline, with Fargo sweltering with anger and wondering what had made Bullard such a talkative old fool back there in the ranchhouse. The man had said entirely too much. That was certain, and for a time Fargo wondered if they would ever be allowed to reach Jerkline alive.

The men surrounding them were of the lowest gunman lot, some of them half-breeds, each was an evil-leering hellion with the mark of treachery stamped upon him.

After they left the mouth of Iron Tail Canyon and headed across Devil River Valley, Fargo saw that they were given several chances to try to make their escape. They were allowed to ride on at spontaneous intervals until they were fifteen or twenty yards ahead of the others. But each time that happened it was too deliberate. The sheriff and his men were simply waiting for them to suddenly spur their horses into a gallop. Roaring guns would have torn them from their saddles before their horses had taken a dozen fast leaps; and reading all the signs of the danger, Fargo made it a point to slacken the pace each time. Once he even pulled to a halt, and spoke to Bullard in a low voice.

"Let them catch up with us, Sam," he warned. "I don't like the looks of this."

"Nor me, either," grunted the older man. "It's too damned plain, Bart. I'm sorry I shot off my mouth so much back at the house, too, but I felt like I was gonna bust. I just had to get a thing or two off my chest."

"Yes, and it gave them something to worry about," half-whispered Fargo. "Keep that lip from now on. Let them do all the talking if there is any talk to be done. We've been in jams that looked bad before this, and we managed to come through."

A group of cowboys probably saved their lives. There were six of them, clean-cut looking fellows riding out from behind a knoll and swinging in behind the group on the old trail. That they had nothing in common with the sheriff and his men became apparent when the group did not ride on to join the others. The cowboys simply hung back, keeping an even distance between them and the sheriff and his men. It continued in that fashion until they reached Jerkline.

They came first to a line of tumble-down sheds and abandoned sheep corrals on the banks of a little creek at the foot of the town, and halted long enough in the creek to allow their horses to drink. Then all of Jerkline lay before them, with a broad, winding main street shaded by a few cottonwood trees, the stores and saloons lined with hitchracks, and crowds of men beginning to appear on the rough-planked walks to stare at the procession as it came on, heading toward the old stone jail at the head of the town.

Fargo watched everything out of the corners of his eyes. He studied the faces of men to his right and left, marking those who were friendly to the sheriff when he passed, and noting others who sneered, shrugged their shoulders and turned away. Here and there, too, he noticed Jasper Hutch lifting his big hat and bowing as the usual variety of dance hall women appeared in the doorways and windows of dives. That in itself told him that Hutch was quite a man-about-town as far as the dives were concerned. He noted also that the men along the street who seemed to belong to the better class were the ones who turned away; and that meant the sheriff was liked only by one clique in Jerkline, and openly despised and sneered at by the other.

"Remember," he warned Bullard in a low voice when they were pulling rein in front of the jail, "to keep that tongue, Sam."

For an answer, the old man started humming some half-forgotten song. Then they were being marched inside the office of the jail where a rusty stove stood in the corner to the left, a big desk to their right. The strangest assortment of guns Fargo had ever seen hung on the walls. Some of them were the newest and latest things in firearms, and some so ancient they might have belonged to the first white man to set foot in the country. He saw his own heavy belts hung on a wooden peg along with Bullard's weapons, and then the handcuffs were being taken off.

All the rest was entirely without ceremony. A one-eyed jailer with a whiskey-bleared eye and a week's stubble of filth-matted beard on his face fumbled with a heavy ring of keys to open the steel door to the corridor. Fargo and Bullard were marched down the corridor, and prodded into a big, evil-smelling cell in the northeast corner of the old building. The door was slammed behind them. The bolts of a powerful lock clattered. Their jailers turned away, straggling back down the corridor. The corridor door slammed, and an ugly, ominous silence settled over the old jail.

CHAPTER IV
Gunpowder Hell!

"AN' THAT'S that, I reckon," grinned Bullard. "Back at home, so to speak. Gimme the makin's of a smoke. I'm fresh out an' ain't got nothin' but the habit left."

They smoked, and they waited. Hours passed. They were like men who had been entombed and left there to die of starvation and sheer loneliness. They found the rusty iron tap in the corner that gave them water, but not until night came did the one-eyed jailer bring them food, and then it was beef and boiled rice so old they could scarcely stomach the smell of it.

The one-eyed man who brought the food did not open the door. He dropped metal pans on the floor, kicked them through the paint-scabbed steel slot under the door, and turned away while another man stood guard behind him with his hand on the butt of a black Colt and a leering, half-daring grin on his face.

"Yore broncs are down in the livery stable," grunted the jailer when Fargo tried to question him. "Seth Plummer took 'em in. He's a duck who'll do most anything. I reckon you ain't got nothin' to worry 'bout. 'Sides all that, you dudes ain't mighty apt to need broncs no more, nohow, not with what Jasper Hutch has agin you."

He was just as surly and reluctant to talk when morning came and he brought bowls of stale mush, a pair of tainted porkchops and tincups of black coffee that had the look and taste of having been boiled all night. He was a non-committal man, one who had evidently been given his strict orders, and one—in spite of his looks—who would allow nothing to keep him from carrying them out.

"Only one thing I've got to say," he half-growled. "I ain't even got no real right to even say it, but if somebody makes you a proposition, you better take it, an' you better play square when you do take it."

"And you mean just what by that?" coaxed Fargo, hoping to draw him out at length. "We're not Greek and can't read all the half-hints, you know. Come out in the open with it. We'll listen."

"I've said all I'm sayin'," sneered the jailer. "Just a half-guess at that. Didn't have no right for it as I said I didn't. Don't try to get me in trouble by tryin' to get me to runnin'

off at the mouth. It won't work worth a damn. I know where my bread's buttered in this town, and runnin' off at the mouth has got some men killed in the past."

He continued like that, and—to their growing surprise—Fargo and Bullard weren't visited by the sheriff. They heard his voice several times in the office, heard him come in and go out at indifferent intervals, sometimes with groups of men following him. Once or twice they heard him cursing somebody, but they could not catch enough of his words to know the true meaning of them.

The fourth day finally dragged to a close with darkness settling over the valley and distant mountain chains. Food was brought at the usual time, but the jailer had grown even more sullen and close-mouthed. He cursed Fargo and Bullard bitterly when they tried to talk to him, and Fargo noticed now that there were two burly, black-bearded guards behind the man. That meant that Sheriff Jasper Hutch was tightening his watch over them for some reason.

FARGO and Bullard were finally asleep on the old bunks. There was nothing else that they could do to pass the time in this lonely hell-hole. Midnight came, and they were aroused from their deep slumber by the sudden roar of an explosion down the street. A regular whirlwind of shooting and yelling followed. They heard men running down the street and by the jail as if all Jerkline was awake and heading toward the lower end of town. Then, gradually, a growing light was making itself known outside.

"Must be a mighty big fire a-ragin' somewhere," whispered Bullard, rubbing sleep from his eyes with water from the old tap in the corner and glancing out the window. "Bright as day down there toward the crick we forded. Wonder what all the shootin's about."

"Quiet." The voice that answered him came from beyond the window. A face against the bars followed it, and they saw that it was Mary Lou McBride. "Dad and two of the boys have fired the old sheep sheds and corrals down on the creek. They've gained the attention of the whole town for a few minutes. Here, take these. Don't stop to ask questions. There's no time for them. *We've got to hurry.*"

Four heavy gun belts bright with cartridges and weighted with six-shooters were thrust through the bars of the window. Fargo seized the first pair, recognized them as his own belts and weapons. Bullard seized the other pair, and a chuckle of happy surprise came from him.

"Bud Crump, the jailer, took the keys with him," whispered the girl, "but I came prepared for that. Here, tie these to the center bar. I think my mare can tear it loose with a few quick lunges if my saddle-horn can stand the shock of the jerks."

She handed them the ends of a pair of half-inch ropes. Fargo grabbed them, pulled them quickly into place, and tied them firmly to the center bar. The girl disappeared, hurrying away in the darkness for a few moments, and then she was back, mounted on a tall, high-strung bay mare. Fargo gave her the signal, and she shot the mare away from the side of the jail.

There was a rip, a crash, and the wild snorting of the mare as she came to the end of the ropes tied to her saddle-horn. The shock almost snatched the animal off its feet and she started to pitch crazily. The girl steeled her, slashed her a few sharp blows with an old-fashioned Spanish quirt, and swung her back close to the window. Then Mary Lou leaned forward and again lunged the mare away.

A crash came like the roar of a gun, splinters of old wood breaking, close-set stones flying in a cloud of blinding dust rising from the window. The bar had gone out. The mare had stumbled to her knees. Fargo saw her lunge up, the girl fighting desperately with the reins and trying to throw off the ropes from the saddle-horn as the mare whirled and threatened to tangle herself in them.

"Quick! Let's go!" whispered Fargo, buckling on his belts. "There's no time to lose, Sam. Our landlord's liable to be back at any second!"

Bullard went first with Fargo right behind him. The girl had flung the ropes from her saddle-horn and guided her mare on to the concealing shelter of a low thicket of jackpines northeast of the corner of the building. Fargo and Bullard followed her, and found her there still trying to quiet the excited mare.

"Head for the livery stable, down there!" she told them. "Go to it from the rear. Keep to the darkness as much as you possibly can. Seth Plummer is a friend of Dads. He has your horses saddled and ready.

"And where do we go from there?" demanded Fargo with his eyes shining with downright amazement at the courage of this slender little beauty.

"Don't worry about what we are to do or where we are going!" He could have sworn that she was laughing and that her eyes were shining with glee. "I'll be there to lead the way—*hurry!*"

THEY started at a trot, following the way she pointed out to them. Soon they were behind the houses and stores along the east side of the street. With the girl keeping farther back in the darkness to attract as little attention as possible, they came to the rear doors of Seth Plummer's big stables. Here, just inside in the shadows, were their horses, both saddled and bridled, their old rifles hanging in place. A man took shape in the deeper shadows, hastening forward. They had never seen him before—and could not get a good look at him now—but it was a simple matter to guess he was Plummer.

"Get goin'!" he hissed. "I saw Bud Crump an' three of Hutch's best an' most tricky gunmen headin' back toward the jail as if they'd smelled a mouse an' knowed somethin's wrong. They were in a hell of a hurry! Burn leather, fellas. Don't stop to talk. Yore bills were paid hours ago, an' if they weren't I wouldn't stop you to collect 'em."

They swung into their saddles, two lightning-fast hawks suddenly taking wings. Fifty yards away, a dark shadow at the corner of a long line of old sheds, was the dimly outlined form of the girl and her mare waiting for them. They slammed home their spurs, and started toward her at a gallop. Then, just as they emerged from the darker shadows, a voice roared out of the night.

"Let 'em have it! That's them! Don't let them get away. *Kill them, boys!*"

Shots tore at them. For a split-second it looked like a trap, looked as if that amazingly pretty little sister of the Paint Rock Kid had deliberately led them here to be shot down by hidden gunmen.

Fargo heard Bullard's horse snort. He saw the animal stumble and go down to his knees, but the horse righted himself with a long leap, and then they were riding hell for leather, their guns churning shots back at the men who had opened fire on them; and from the shadow of the building ahead—trying to cover them—a pair of silver-plated six-shooters in the hands of Fighting Bill McBride's daughter started crashing out their own little hells among the daisies . . .

They rode for it, and they rode like

the devil was behind them. A cloud of horsemen took shape from somewhere. Voices bawled and barked commands. It was as though every den and dive in Jerkline responded with an alarming quickness. Hitch-racks emptied. Men flung themselves hot on their trail, and they were off and away, horses blowing and snorting, the flashing roll and bitter drumfire of guns making streaks of light in the darkness.

Mary Lou McBride led the way. They shot down through dark alleyways and raced up wagon-rutted side-streets. They struck the rimrocked knolls east of the town, and vanished into them, with their horses and the mare straining every muscle and tendon to carry their burdens out of danger and put Jerkline behind them as quickly as possible.

AFTER riding a mile the girl had thrown the following swarms off their trail. Fargo admired her all the more when he saw how she so skillfully worked them through the knolls and thickets, taking advantage of every bit of shelter as rifles were brought into play behind them and the crying of bullets became a steady whistling around them as they rambled on and on in the mad pace.

With horses and the mare blowing and dripping with sweat, they pulled up at last, having swung in behind a high knoll and then curved back to the top of it to allow the foremost swarm of riders to dash on with the sounds of their oaths and the roar of their shots still filling the air. Then, dismounted and holding their animals by the nostrils, they waited until the rest were gone, tearing it lickety-split. When it had grown quiet, the girl again mounted. They swung back along the way they had come for almost a mile, and headed southward, crossing the creek and hugging the wall of timber along its winding banks.

Three other riders suddenly showed ahead of them when they were a mile west of the dark mouth of Iron Tail Canyon. The riders came swinging their horses from around a timbered knoll. Oklahoma Sam Bullard swore in a husky whisper, slinging the long holsters of his big guns forward on their belts and again ready to make this thing a fight or a damned fine frolic leading to somebody's funeral. The girl heard him, and lifted her hand as she pulled rein to bring her mare to a quick halt.

"That's good old Dad and two of our riders!" Her voice was like a quick, sharp whisper panting with excitement. "They did their part. I did mine. Look!"

She took off her big hat and waved it in the starshine. An answering wave came back, and they were riding on at a walk to give their mounts a badly-needed chance to catch their jaded breaths while the three riders in the distance brought their horses to a halt and sat there in their saddles waiting for them.

"Conserving horseflesh," explained Fighting Bill McBride with a dry grin when they came up to him and his bronco busters. "A good thing to do in anybody's squabble. How'd my young one handle her little part of the night's work, Fargo?"

"As well as you, myself, and sixteen others could have handled it!" answered Fargo, a broad grin suddenly streaking his face, the first one that had come wholeheartedly to his face since he had come to know the men. "I've never met anybody better, nobody quite as good. She was even a shade better than Paint Rock in a jam, and that's saying more than you'll ever realize. It must run in the family."

"It does, if you're speaking of dependability when it's hard-needed," nodded McBride, soberly. "We buried Johnny the day after they took you and Bullard off to that

damned jail. I found what Bullard said was true, too. Every word of it. And I found something else in that money belt you brought me. Thirty thousand dollars! The boy was always of the saving sort."

"But—but tell them about the something else in that belt, Dad!" put in the girl, eagerly. "Something you said was far more important than money, even as badly as we need it these days."

"I did!" nodded McBride. "There was a picture in that belt with the money. It was a picture of Johnny taken sitting between two men. Must have been made in Mexico at some time. On the back of it, in Johnny's own handwriting, was written *'The only men outside of my Dad that I can trust to hell and back.'* You fellows were the two in the picture. I'm thanking you now for what you've done for me—and I'm backing anything you do, Fargo. The same goes for you, Bullard. I don't make friends quickly, but I keep them when I do. I hope you understand.

"You men are free birds now." He cleared his throat gently, "Out of jail with the plain blue sky over your heads and the wind blowing free all around you. You ain't wanting to change that picture. There are the hills." He waved his left hand to southward. "If you've ridden with my Johnny, you can singe the tail-feathers off any damned posse string that sets out behind you. Hit the grit. Hit it and keep going. To stay here will only get you both killed."

"Only we don't hit the grit when we set in on somebody's deal," half-growled Bullard, chewing a wad of tobacco the size of his gnarled thumb and glancing up at the sky. "That's speakin' for us both, an' I ain't lyin' or takin' too much for granted. We most generally stick around until the owl's through hollerin' an 'the elley-funt's passed in review for the last time. We're just built thataway, Mr. McBride. I reckon we come by it natural."

"And you've said just what Dad said you would say!" cried the girl, swinging her mare closer to Fargo. "Only—only it's going to be deadly dangerous. Far more dangerous than we can tell you!"

"I think, ma'am," Fargo looked at her with a frown, "that we've been bedfellows with danger so long that we'd be downright lonesome without it. Where do we go from here?"

"To the hills!" exclaimed McBride. "To the hills north of Iron Tail, to a hide-out that's kept men safe long before this, long before you were born, Fargo, if that means anything. You can't go on to the ranch, not just now, anyway. You'll go—"

"Lis'en!" cut in one of the bronco busters, a tall, hook-nosed man of forty by the name of Bensen who suddenly straightened himself in his saddle and threw up his hand for silence. "Hear them shots? Sounds like they're comin' straight out of Iron Tail Canyon!"

They were like whispers in the night, faint and far-away sounds punctuated by long intervals of silence, then coming again in a fierce chattering and thundering. They came closer, coming rapidly, the noise growing in intensity. Suddenly it was not the sounds of firing at all. There had been firing, but it had given away to something that pattered and pounded, something that rolled and lumbered like an army of wagons in the distance, wagons coming devil-bent and with all the reckless confusion of a mad stampede tearing down the broad arm of Devil River disappearing in the canyon mouth.

"Horses," Fargo almost whispered the word as he glanced at the anger-white face of Fighting Bill McBride. "Plenty of them, a large herd, and they're coming fast."

"My horses, yes," nodded McBride, grimly. "Rustlers playing out their string again tonight. Somebody must have seen me leaving the canyon. Somebody must have been watching the ranch. This will make the seventh string of my good stock—if they get away with it. But—but we ain't going to let 'em! Come on, damn it! Let's ride! We've got to try to head them off and drive them back into the canyon."

"Wait! Fargo's voice was a command, one that seemed to jerk even the hot-tempered McBride to a quick halt. "Give them a chance! Let them take those horses where they're started with them. It's the only way to find the rest of your herds, McBride."

"Damn it, some of the herds have been killed in the river!" McBride's voice was growing in volume until it was about to become a long-drawn wail. *"In the river,* I tell you! It's only somebody trying to ruin me, trying to—to—"

Riders darting out of the mouth of Iron Tail Canyon had cut him off. They could see the men clearly, five of them with their rifle barrels glistening in the moonlight; men who were riding like an evil wind, each crouched low over his saddle-horn. The star-light caught one of them just right. For an instant the man gleamed like harsh light reflecting from a mirror.

"Those are the herd points!" hissed Fargo, his eyes shining with excitement. *"Wait!"* His right hand streaked forward to close on McBride's left arm with a harsh grip. "Not yet! Let them come. The chances are we couldn't stop them, anyway. Let them go—*we'll see where they're going.*"

"What's that one of 'em has got on him that makes 'im so bright-lookin'?" demanded one of the bronco busters. "He shines up like he's been greased."

"All five of them are like that!" answered Fargo in a low, even tone. "Wait *McBride!"* Again his voice lifeted into a sharp command, one that caused McBride to look at him with a quick snarl. "Swing back under the shadows. *Quick!* We don't want them to see us—if some lookout they'll have planted hasn't spotted us already!"

THEY moved back with McBride, reluctant to do it, like a typical old gun-buster who wanted to go right out and throw himself into a fight. He reminded Fargo of a fighting bulldog straining at his chain. But Fargo forced it. They swept back, completely out of sight now, and sat there watching. In a few moments they saw the leading horses of the running herd break from the canyon mouth. Just as Fargo had said, the five men in the lead started pointing the herd, heading it straight down the northwest bank of the east fork river at that same furious pace.

"Damn 'em, they're going to drown them!" moaned McBride. "Whatnahell are we waiting for? Why'n hell are we just standing here? We ain't doing a damned thing to stop it!"

"Men don't rustle horses just to drown them—*Wait!"* Again Fargo caught him by the arm, jerking him to another halt and keeping him from lunging his horse right out of the shadows. "I think we're about to see something you should have seen long ago. Come on. Follow me, but stay behind me. *We must not break cover."*

He whirled his horse with a quick prod of his spurs. Keeping behind the knolls and hugging the advantage of every thicket of low jackpines, he kept all their movements concealed as they followed him in a ragged line.

"Look!" He pulled up at last. "Watch this. Right here is where we're going to learn something. Look at the points. See? See?"

The whole herd of horses was in sight now, manes flying like clouds, tails bannering in the wind. Three of the point riders were already taking to the river. The other two were crowing the leading horses of the running herd, slowly but surely pointing the high-strung leaders toward the stream. Now the leaders were going into it, following the men who were already in the water. Like a racing black cloud being drawn and swallowed into a hole, the rest of the horses followed, going down a sharp bank. They were gone in another minute with seven men bringing up the rear.

"Now look!" half-whispered Fargo, pointing again. "The seven of the gang who were behind the herd in the canyon now drops back to take care of anybody who might be senseless enough to try to follow right on their heels. Look at the two points. They're following the horses, going into the water. That glistening you've noticed—"

"Is waterproofed clothes they're wearing!" cut in the girl, no longer able to control her excitement. "Oh, I understand now! Can't you, Dad? It's so clear!"

"It—it's suicide!" moaned McBride, running a nervous hand over his pale face. "Suicide for my horses—"

"Not for anybody!" interrupted Fargo. "I'll say, as I have before, that it's part of something you should have known long ago. Come on! If it's suicide, then I'm the next candidate on the ticket. Sam will back the play, I know. Come on—and keep out of the light. We've got to hurry through with this to see it all."

The girl was the very first to follow him. The others strung out behind him, not yet understanding what he was going to do or just what he was going to show them.

But they were behind him to a man, and even if he knocked at the gates of Hell they'd follow him.

CHAPTER V
Horsethief Hell!

THEY kept to the trees. The seven rustlers, who had turned back, scattered out, taking shelter to watch the mouth of Iron Tail Canyon. Fargo saw where they went into hiding, but he kept right on, leading the way in the heaviest shadows until they came at last to the foot of a tall, pine-covered knoll only two-hundred yards north of the giant whirlpool in the river.

With no time to waste, they urged their horses up the slope of the knoll.

Once atop it they had a clear view of Devil River down there in its rock-walled gorge in the bright starshine, and now they could see the stolen herd and the men in charge of it.

The men who had first taken to the water were well in front of the horses. Nothing could possibly leave the stream where they were now. The men had slipped out of their saddles, swimming in the icy water beside their horses and rising now and then to quirt the animals into a faster swimming pace.

The whirlpool loomed directly ahead of the swimmers, and even Fargo found himself holding his breath. He watched the swimming men reach the whirlpool, saw them bob high in the water, and then they were gone, one following the other. The swimming herd of horses were right after them. Some of the animals bawled frantically. Some of them tried to turn back as terror gripped them there in the icy current. Some fought desperately, snorting and slinging water as they tried to climb atop of each other. But that raging current had them in its power. In pairs, they started going down, some of them by the head, some of them

tail first. In a short time the last horse, save for those following in control of the swimming men behind the herd, was gone—swallowed by that raging and foaming river.

Now the other men followed. Like the first they rose beside their horses, then plunged down, hands still gripping their saddles; and they were gone, vanished, swallowed like the herd had been swallowed, gone to only God knew where.

"Damn," whispered McBride, expelling a long breath, his face even whiter than it had been before. "What — what in hell do you make of it, Fargo?"

"I think it is very clear." Fargo glanced up the valley, and then told him of the man who had jumped his horse into the river just after the Paint Rock Kid had been shot. "And at the time, I said that fellow was no suicide. He knew exactly what he was doing, exactly where he was going. There's simply a big tunnel under that cliff, one probably worn as smooth as the bore of a rifle by the water. It can't be a long one, either. That whirlpool simply goes down there and comes up immediately. Horses, you know, can't stay under water except for a very short time. A man can't either, but he can stay much longer than a horse, especially a frantic horse. All those horses are right now in a valley or some big canyon beyond that cliff."

"And by what and how are we going to prove it?" demanded McBride, looking like a man who could not yet believe the things he had seen in front of his eyes. "How in the hell and Tom Walker can you prove it, Fargo?"

"By doing exactly what those rustlers did with the herd." A hard, mirthless little smile twitched the corners of Fargo's grimly set mouth. "It'll probably scare us half to death but that's the only way to prove it."

"You mean to say," scowled McBride, "that you're damned fool enough to jump your horse off in that river and let that whirlpool carry you down and under?"

Hutch spun to the ground as Fargo whirled, smashed hot slugs at his hidden attackers.

"He's fool enough to try anything once," rumbled Bullard, stirring himself to life. "An' I'm just damned fool enough to follow him to hell — an' bring back Old Billy B. Damn's horns to show you that we've been there an' got back."

"By God, man, I wouldn't let you do it!" A look of fear had spread over McBride's face. "I won't do it! I'd feel like a cheap killer, a man who had used a friend—"

"We're our own keeper, McBride," cut in Fargo. "We're answerable to nobody but ourselves. When we decide to take a chance on something, we take it."

"Only one thing I dread about it." Bullard suddenly grinned. "That water's goin' to be as cold as hell on pore old bones shaky an' squeaky as mine. Say the rest, Bart, an' we'll start."

No more words were spoken.

THEY were preparing to enter the stream a few minutes later. Swinging back off the knoll, still hugging the shadows for mere safety, they struck a rocky little gorge fringed with bushes and tall grass that twisted its way down to the edge of the stream. Fargo led the way along it on his black. Bullard was right behind him, pale and determined, a man who would never see a partner ride into anything without following him and sticking to him until the end of everything. McBride was about to prove himself a man of the same character a few minutes later.

"You roosters beat me!" he exclaimed when they came to a halt right at the edge of the seething and whispering stream. "I'm damned if I can set back here on my hamhocks and see you fellows go it alone. No man riding for me has ever been sent into something where I wouldn't follow him. I reckon I'm too old to start backing down now on the way I've lived in the past."

"Stay out of it," ordered Fargo. "We may need help to get out of where we're going. The main thing we're after is to quietly locate your stock. After that—"

The sudden crash of a shot cut him off. A bullet whistled down at them from a high ledge above the whirlpool. It was followed by another and another, quick shots with their long, ragged gashes of flame cutting out the dead-black darkness up there, the bullets whistling and crying dangerously close before one struck a horse of a bronco buster, knocking the animal down, the blood flying from a wound that had raked hard across the top of its head.

"Take cover, damn it!" barked McBride. "Duck for it, Shorty!" He barked that to the short, bow-legged little man named Shorty Miller, whose horse had just dropped from under him. "Hell's broke loose for fair up there."

But there was no turning back, no getting away from the wild scramble that followed. A bullet raked Mary Lou McBride's mare across the rump. Before the girl could stop her, the mare had snorted and made one crazy plunge straight out into the stream. The water splashed up around her and came splattering down, closing over the girl and the mare just as Fargo lunged his black after her.

It looked like they were all going for the pool now. Bullard followed Fargo with a barked-out oath. McBride was right behind him, and as if he could not hold his horse, Chug Bensen, the second bronco buster, was into the stream. The water caught them as they came, and like flying chips in a giant spillway they were hurling forward, the horses and the mare trying to fight against the current, the bullets now raining down at them from the high ledge in a frenzy of rapid shooting.

Fargo reached the side of the girl, trying desperately to help her with all thoughts of the shooting forgotten, and they were the first ones to be sucked down by the raging waters and to vanish from sight.

It was like death, itself. Fargo felt the girl leave her mare and surge to him, her quick, grasping hands clawing into the bosom of his shirt. He flung his left arm around her, and lifted his right to cover the top of his head.

They went down and down, a wild roaring filling their ears, the icy water soaking them to the bone. Then they were coming upward, hurled along like bullets in the foaming current. Suddenly they were thrown almost clear of the water and hurled upward in pitch-blackness. They were whirled around and around. Once Fargo's protecting right hand brushed smooth rock. Then they were swirled around a bend, and a yawning hole, filled with starshine, loomed ahead of them.

A minute later they were flung against a sloping bank of sand and knocked off their feet. As they stumbled up, Fargo's dripping and terror-stricken horse came out of the water and started to dart past him. Fargo flung out his hand just in time to catch the wet and slippery reins. He was not quick enough to catch the girl's mare, for the animal came out of the stream a little farther away, and bucking and snorting headed down what appeared to be great, deep canyon hemmed in to the north and south by towering black cliffs.

Barely had the girl's mare gone when McBride appeared, still clinging to his horse. Bullard and Chug Bensen followed, both also holding on to their horses. They came stamping and shivering out of the water, their frightened horses lunging along beside them and threatening to drag them off their feet like the half-drowned and half-frozen wretches they were before they could calm them down and jerk some sense into their heads.

"God A'mighty, look at the stock in here!" shiveringly groaned McBride a minute or two later, gazing down the canyon as he struggled to quiet his horse. "Man alive, it looks full of both cows and horses. The pick of the stock of the ranges, you can bet!"

"We've got to get away from here," warned Fargo. "Remember the duck on the cliff who was shooting at us. He knows we're in the canyon, and the chances are ten to one in his favor that he'll come through some hole and soon be on this side of the cliff. Come on!"

He swung himself into his wet saddle, clothing still dripping. He swung the girl up behind him. They were all mounted by then, and Fargo had whirled his black to lead the way on down the canyon when a rifle started crashing up there in the black ledges of the cliff above the spilling mouth of the stream. Fargo let out a yell as he drove his rowels into his black's ribs to start the wild gallop forward.

"That's our man after us again. *Ride!*"

They rode, a scattered-out string whipping and spurring their horses as they sought shelter farther down the stream while the rifleman on the ledges up there followed them with bullets as fast as he could fire until they were whirling around a rim-rocked knoll and getting themselves out of gun-range.

"OUT of the fryin' pan and into the fire, so to speak the good old sayin'," growled Bullard a short time later. "I reckon every dad-burned rustler in the canyon knows we're in here by this time. Listen, Bart! Hear them hoofs ringin'? Somebody's comin' up the canyon like hell a-beatin' the tin roof off the pore house. We've got to do somethin'."

Riders were coming, the growing clatter and mad pounding hoofs rising like growling thunder. The shooting up there on the ledge had come to an end, but it had been enough to attract men down the canyon and bring them quirting and hurrying toward the place where the river raced out of the black hole in the cliff.

"McBride's in the canyon!" The voice came from the cliff, the owner of it yet hidden up there in the dead darkness. It was a long-drawn voice that seemed to reach down over the canyon to go rocketing and reverberating to every knoll. *"McBride, his gal, an' three others! In the canyon! Straight down the river. Behind that first knoll! McBride! Fightin' Bill McBride is in the canyon!"*

"Yeah, he is," drawled the rancher in a low tone. "And once before he found where his horses had been run into that river out there along with my old riding boss who stuck to them *until the end.* I thought it was to

just get rid of them because we were hard after the gang, and because my Old Jim Yardley had got himself caught in the herd and wouldn't come out of it. I ain't yet had a chance to tell you about Old Jim. There's been too much going on. He taught my Johnny to ride. He taught Mary Lou all she knows. But—but say what's next, Fargo? I'll leave the bossing of us up to you when it comes to what we're going to do from now on."

"Keep quiet," whispered Fargo. "Get your guns ready. This will have to be fast. Catch them before they scatter out on us and take the advantage of shelter."

They could see the galloping riders now. There were six of them, each man mounted on a spirited horse, animals probably stolen from the Iron Tail. They were no more than three hundred yards away, and it was evident that the pound and clatter of the hoofs of their horses were drowning out the sounds of the continued yelling and raging of the man on the cliff.

Rifles were crashing a minute later. The riders had jerked to a halt in the distance. The man on the cliff was still yelling down his wild warnings as if he had become some mechanical instrument up there that was going to rage and wail for the rest of the night. One of the riders must have heard him. Fargo saw a man throw up his hands, saw the running horses jam together in their quick halt with some of them rearing and lunging. The voice of the man on the cliff came again, as clear and long-ringing as a bell.

"Look out down there, boys! Bill McBride, his gal, an' *three others* are in the canyon—"

A crash from Oklahoma Sam Bullard's old rifle cut the voice short with its far-rolling report. One of the men in the distance straightened with a jerk in his saddle, then rocked forward to crowd himself low over his saddle-horn as his horse whirled with him. A wild yell and a sharp clattering of hoofs followed as the others scattered out, their guns leaping into action and blazing red fire.

It was a running war, blood and gunpowder after that. Fargo spilled a man from his saddle. Bensen killed a horse with a quick shot and a bullet that went a yard low of its mark. They saw the horse plunge into the air with a death leap, saw it go down, its rider striking the ground and a cloud of flying gravel and dust boilin around them. Fargo was tilting another man in his saddle then, and by this time Fighting Bill McBride was into it, blazing away with a rifle that still dripped with river water as he snatched it out of the long boot on his saddle.

They rode for them after that, with the girl clinging to Fargo's back and riding with her hair bannering in the wind behind him. They came to the place where the horse Bensen had unintentionally shot, had gone down. A man was lying there beside the animal, a snarling, black-bearded beast of a fellow with his right leg pinned under his horse. A blazing six-shooter started crashing in the man's hand. Bullard swerved close to him, as if he was going to ride right over him, and his six-shooters thundered, rocking the man backward with one bullet through the chest and another that squirted blood from a round hole in the center of his forehead.

"And I said the old buck couldn't shoot!" yelled McBride in a strange, half-crazy voice of glee as he galloped on. "That's a horse on me, you fighting old hellion, and you can have the pick of the herd when you want him!"

Fargo spilled another man from his horse with a quick, half-aimed shot that jerked the man straight in his saddle and then curved him backward to bounce and bound off the rump of his horse and strike the ground.

Save for that man up there in the rocks above the river, there were but two of the men left now. Both were sorely wounded, both lying low over their saddle-horns, each weaving and rocking from side to side, and neither making an attempt to fight back. They pounded on with shots still tearing at them. After a mile a tall grove of cottonwoods showed ahead. Finally a light gleamed from the window of a low, sod-roofed cabin under the trees.

Fargo saw one of the men crouched over his saddle suddenly reel a little farther than usual to the right when his horse reached the end of the cabin. As limply as a rag, the man fell there at the end of the cabin. The other man rode on, and smashed into a big corral gate beyond the cabin to roll to the ground in an unconscious bundle. Then, every gun ready, Fargo and the others were plunging into the cabin yard and snatching their horses to a halt just as a door opened, and a tall, gray-headed skeleton-shape stood in the faltering light from a smoky lamp on a table in the front room of the cabin.

He looked old, so old that he was like the shadow of a ghost standing there in the doorway of the cabin. Beard covered his face like a snowy cloud, a pair of sunken dark eyes appearing to burn through it. A greasy cook's apron was on him. His feet were bare, and from his right ankle, running backward into the cabin, was a long, shiny steel chain.

"Bill!" he cried. "Bill, oh, *Bill McBride!*"

"Yardley—Jim Yardley!" Fighting Bill McBride's voice rose like a wail as he flung himself out of his saddle. *"Jim!"*

"Uncle Jim!" cried the girl, and as if forgetting rustlers, she was flinging herself down from behind Fargo and darting toward the old man in the doorway like some young wild thing with waving hands and arms. *"Uncle Jim!"*

"Howdy, Leather Britches!" The old man's voice was a high, cracked wail, filled with intense emotion that seemed to have been waiting a long, long time for an opportunity of expression. "I—I said you—an'—an' Bill—would some day—find yore way—here."

CHAPTER VI
Battle Royal!

"MONTHS of waitin' here, yes, Leather Britches." The old ghost of a man was going to pieces a few minutes later. He had dropped forward on his knees there in the doorway with Mary Lou McBride sobbing in his arms. "I knowed Bill would come, would find the way. I waited, bein' kicked 'round, at times whipped with a quirt if the biscuits wasn't just right, if the beef was cooked a little too much or not enough.

"They got me the night I got caught in the herd an' couldn't break my way out." His voice rose into a cackle. "In the jam comin' through the whirlpool I got bad hurt. Then Jasper Hutch comes, remembers that I used to cook mighty well, an' they started me in on that."

"So Jasper Hutch has been here!" rumbled McBride with something moist and shiny in his eyes. "Behind the whole show, like I've always said, Jim!"

"Lape Lassiter's the real boss!" exclaimed the older man. "Lape, the snake who started our Johnny on the gun trail. The woman what helped 'im left 'im, they say, in Mexico. But —but Lassiter's been back here more'n a year, comin' an' goin' betwix suns. An'—an' Jasper Hutch ain't Jasper *Hutch*. He's Jasper Lassiter, brother to that damned Lape . . ."

Fargo took no part in the long string of conversation and outbursts of swearing that followed. He and

Bullard and Bensen brought in the men who had dropped from their horses outside.

The man who had slipped from his saddle at the end of the old cabin was already dying. At the first examination it looked like the man who had tumbled to the ground when his horse struck the corral gate was sorely wounded. Both men were unconscious, and the second to be brought in was tall and dark-faced, a mixture of Indian and Mexican and white. He was the first to open his eyes, glowering up from the earthen floor. Fargo thrust a lighted cigarette between his lips, an old habit of his when he stood over men sorely wounded or dying. The breed's expression changed, first to a puzzled frown, and then to something akin to appreciation in his smoky-black eyes.

"*Gracias, hombre,*" he grunted at last. "It is not always that my enemies do nice things for me."

"That's Handsome Frank," put in Old Jim Yardley. "He was never downright mean to me."

"*Si!*" agreed the man on the floor. "I do not abuse old men."

The other man started regaining consciousness now. He tried to sit up, and then fell back, glowering over the room. Suddenly he started to curse everybody in front of him.

"You birds are only in a trap here!" he snarled. "Nothin' but a trap. Hutch'll come. He's got plenty backin', an' he ain't goin' to let go of all these hosses an' cattle we've run in. Lape's only got out three bunches. He'll be back Saturday night—"

"And we'll be waiting right here for him in the bushes!" cut in McBride, unable to control himself. "We'll hang that buzzard!"

"Like hell!" the dying man snarled. "Yo'll go in yore damned grave in the sand down the river under the red bluffs below the first bend where others have gone in the past who found their way in here."

"That's Rile Ludwig," growled Old Jim. "There's keys in his pocket for this lock on my chain. It was him an' that snake of a Rio Juan up there on Forlorn Pass the night they killed our Johnny. I heard 'em talkin' 'bout it."

Fighting Bill McBride started toward the man. Fargo threw him back. Ludwig cursed them both. He kept it up, a snarling, raging beast. Blood, suddenly gushing from his mouth and spilling down his chin, halted him, shocked him back to his senses, and left him lying there with his eyes bulging with terror.

"And now you die," sneered Handsome Frank, turning his head to look at him. "You die and I will live. I will help these people, and these people will help me. I have killed nobody here, and maybe one day I can go back to Mexico and my Juanita." He chuckled. "A coward's way, you may say, but what of it. I will take it. Eh, yes!"

"Somebody's comin'!" Bensen had been outside, watching the canyon. He came banging into the door now. "Better blow that light. It sounds like the devil's own army on the move. They're comin' fast, too, from the east an' the north."

THERE was no time for anything else. Already the growling thunder of hoofs had started rolling like warring drums from the east. Another rumbling joined in, hard-pounding across the canyon from the north. The noises grew into one, the smash and crash of flying shale, the snorting of foam-lathered horses, the squeak of saddles, and the voices of men lifting with growing excitement.

Apparently the riders had been informed of everything that had taken place in the canyon. There was no waste of words. Men circled the cabin, the corrals, and a small group of stables west of the cabin. With their horses left back and out of danger, the circle closed in, a sudden

silence settling as if even the night was holding its breath and waiting for the command for the fight to begin.

"Come out of that cabin!" thundered a voice. "You haven't got a chance! We know who's in there!"

"Don't answer them," warned Fargo, but he was too late. Months of being here in this hell-hole had filled Old Jim Yardley's soul with a rankling bitterness that suddenly came spilling from him in a flood of wildly ringing words."

"Come an' get us, you thievin' varmits!" That came before anybody could clamp a hand over his mouth to silence him. "Come on in an' jine our party. The biscuits an' meat's cooked just like you want it, but the chain's off my ankle an' two good guns are fillin' my hands from the holsters of Rile Ludwig's belts!"

Shots answered him. They began like breaking limbs and splintering planks, an all-encircling volley of quick, stabbing lights out there in the darkness, the bullets slapping with a vicious *whang-ing*. Some of them found their way through the chinking of mud and moss between the pine-log walls of the cabin. One ranged a little higher than the others. It struck a tall, red can of baking powder on a little shelf above the rusty sheet-iron stove in the corner, and down came the can, the lid flying off, the fogging white cloud of the powder filling the room with an acrid bite.

Bullets caught the old stove a few moments later. The cast-iron legs flew into thousands of slivers beneath it, and down came the stove, its spilling and boiling clouds of ashes spreading with the baking powder and starting everybody into a fit of coughing and gasping for fresh air.

The cubby-hole windows were next to go by the board, the dirt-streaked panes of glass flying. Now the door was catching the slugs. Long splinters leaped, slithered and sang across the room, tearing out the old wood and leaving murky eyes of light behind them where the bullets had gouged their way through.

"Keep down," Fargo warned in a low tone from time to time. "Let them shoot their heads off until the first burst of the fever's over, and then we can have a chance."

He was down on his hands and knees on the floor, and the others were obeying him for the moment. Now and then he ducked to a window, fired a random shot into the night, and dropped back. In a little while he had found a sooty iron poker near the bullet-wrecked stove. Using it as a pry he started gouging chinking from between the logs near the hard-packed floor, making holes through which they could thrust the muzzles of their weapons to fire when the time came for them to enter it desperately.

AN HOUR passed. The fight roared and raged on, hotter than the hubs of hell at one moment, the shots scattering away at the next. Oklahoma Sam Bullard had picked up a flesh wound through the right forearm during one of the bitterest bursts of the shooting. He had wrapped a soiled handkerchief around his arm, tying it tightly with his teeth, and had kept right on fighting as if nothing in the world had happened.

Others had been nipped with bullets, but no real damage had been done to anybody inside the cabin; and finally, to everybody's surprise, Handsome Frank asked them for a gun to help them return the firing.

"If I'm good to you," he told them during another slight lull in the fighting, "you may be good to me in return."

But they were not trusting a horse-thief—even one with a change of heart—with a gun at this time. They knew now that his wounds were not as serious as they had looked at the beginning, and this man was valuable property, a man whose apparently

willing tongue could clear all the dark angles and mysteries of this rustler den when the proper time for talk came.

Fargo took him farther back in the room and placed him against a big floor log to make certain that no bullet from the outside would find him. For more protection, he laid the already stiffening body of Rile Ludwig in front of him.

The fight roared on, blazes of light whipping the darkness out there in the starshine, thundering and gashing flames leaping back toward them from the little stand-off crowd there in the cabin. Now and then a harsh cry arose, punctuated as often as not by bellowing oaths to show that some rustler had been caught by a bullet and had been thrown out of the fight.

"They've got us cornered unless help comes," finally confided Fargo. "We're in a box right here under the trees, and we're cut off from every direction."

Handsome Frank called to him at spontaneous intervals, but he ignored the man. Hell, this was no time to talk. This was a fight, a stand-off. Twice the cabin had been almost fired by men slipping up behind rocks and trees to light bundles of dry sticks, grass and weeds, and to hurl them forward. Fargo had killed one of the men, sprawling him forward with a snap-shot from the north window. It had discouraged the rustlers somewhat, but it was a certainty that they would keep trying. And if the fire started, it would be hell.

Somewhere along toward four o'clock the fire did start. Oklahoma Sam Bullard killed the man who flung the flaming bundle against the southeast corner of the cabin, and it looked for a few moments as if another perfectly good attempt to burn them out had failed. But a gentle crackling sound started making itself known, and a sudden wild cheering filled the canyon . . .

BUT out in Devil River Valley life still stirred. Shorty Miller awoke with one of those dark-brown tastes in his mouth that sometimes come to bronco busters who have liquored out the night on rot-gut jackass brandy. He was lying flat on his back, and he wondered how he got there.

Then, gradually, it came back to him. His horse, already dead, lay three or four yards away, and as he sat up he remembered the others going into Devil River; remembered the wild shooting that had followed. One of those bullets from the black cliff up there had found him, had raked him along the side of the left cheek, and had knocked him down. That accounted for the taste of blood in his mouth. It accounted, also, for that awful swimming in his head.

He stumbled to his knees, and then fell back with a groan. For five minutes more he lay there listening to the whispering of the river and staring up at the thin mare-tails of clouds scattered across the sky. He was too sick to move, too sick to do anything.

The sounds of galloping horses roused him. He again stumbled to his hands and knees. A weak and rocking thing, he started crawling, making his way back from the river and keeping down in the rocky little gorge and hidden by the bushes and weeds along its rim. It seemed hours before he was dragging himself up the slope of a knoll and dropping flat on his stomach.

Riders were close at hand now. There was a great swarm of them, so many that he could not count them. In threes and fours, they turned toward the great cliff walling the western side of the valley. It looked like his eyes were playing tricks on him when he saw them vanishing rapidly into a thick tangle of low pines there against the face of the jagged rocks. When they were all gone, he

started half-dragging his way toward the cliff.

A horse snorted in the darkness ahead of him and he halted. He again dropped flat on his stomach. The pounding of his heart started the blood oozing from his cheek again.

One of the riders had not gone on with the others. The man was hidden up there in the darkness, and in a little while Shorty could tell that he was dismounted and standing beside his horse. He started forward again, worming his way through the bushes and rocks. When he was a few rods away from the hidden horseman, he reached to his hip for his old Frontier Colt. An oath whispered from his lips. Damn it, his gun was gone, lost back there somewhere when his horse had gone down.

He thought of turning back, but that wouldn't do! He had caught a glimpse of another figure, one sneaking along with a rifle high up there in the rocks and following a jagged ledge. The man came on until he was directly above the hidden horseman, and Shorty heard him call down to the man in a guarded tone.

"Who's down there? This is Wince up here."

"It's me—Bull Redfern, Wince," answered the hidden horseman. "How's it goin' in there?"

"Fightin' to beat hell," answered the man with the rifle. "I can't tell who's who from the other side of the cliff, but it looks like our gang's got things goin'. Anymore of the boys comin'?"

"More went through the north hole, yeah," answered the hidden horseman. "I reckon we ain't got nothin' to worry 'bout, but you better keep to yore perch. You can never tell what'll happen when that damned old Fightin' Bill sets in on a deal."

"I know." The man above chuckled. "It's a good thing that a lot of you dudes was close by when I started tryin' to pick 'em off out of the river. I did get me one duck. Him an' his hoss . . ."

Shorty Miller kept listening. It looked as if the man on the ledge would never go back to his perch, but he was finally going. Miller watched him, and saw him vanish high up there in a hole. Now, gunless, the little bronco buster eased on with a do-or-die glint lighting his pale eyes. He worked himself around a pile of rocks, up through the ground-sweeping limbs of low trees, and came at last to a ledge-like shelf behind the horseman.

The man was standing there in the darkness to the right of his horse. Shorty knew him, had seen him hanging around Jerkline with the drinking and gambling bunch many times. No one needed to tell him that Bull Redfern would have those two big, silver-mounted .45's at his barrel-shaped waitline.

He was ten feet away when Shorty came to his last halt; ten feet from the ledge where a burly devil, dark-bearded, black hat sitting at a rakish angle on his curly head, was standing. Shorty felt for a rock. His hand closed on one the size of his fist. He waited, holding his breath. He lifted the rock, steadying himself. Suddenly he threw the rock with all his strength. Without waiting to see just where it struck, he leaped after it.

An oath snarled at him. Bull Redfern had gone down, struck between the shoulder blades. He struck the ground like a fighting cougar, and rolled over with a quick flinch. A six-shooter started stabbing the darkness with its wicked flame an instant later. Then a weaving, rocking thing was upon him, sobbing, cursing and half-crying little wildcat that had come down from the ledge.

The rest was a little hazy. Shorty found himself on his feet with one of Redfern's guns in his hand. He felt the weapon jerking, caught a flash of spilling blood leaping from

Redfern's forehead. The big Colt slipped out of his fingers after that, and he was weaving on, left hand gripping the right side of his chest, blood oozing out between his fingers.

He caught the frightened horse, conscious of other riders pounding down the valley from somewhere. Painfully, he pulled himself into the saddle. A bloody grin spread across his face as he worked the reins into his right hand while the left still clutched at his chest. Then, as if all his strength was going, he slammed home his big, rusty rowels, and the horse began a wild run.

Shorty Miller was bound for Iron Tail. There would be help if he was alive long enough to get it . . .

CHAPTER VII
Bullet-Hail!

BACK in the canyon, the fight roared on. By digging away chinking and slopping water through the cracks from an old water keg in the corner, Fargo had managed to put out the fire, but it was no sooner out than some other rustler had managed to fire the northeast corner of the cabin.

Smoke found its way into the cabin. The old wood had started to burn furiously. Out of water now, they gouged out more chinking and fought the flames with dirt pried up from the floor with the iron poker. They checked it for a little while.

Then Chug Bensen died. He was pushing dirt through the cracks with his hands when a bullet whistled through the flames and caught him just below the bridge of the nose.

"We ain't got a chance, boys." That was coming from Fighting Bill McBride a few moments later. "They've got us licked. Hell, they can take all the time they want—"

A crash from Fargo's old Winchester cut him off. By the light of the flames, he had killed a man out there fifty yards away.

"I'll try to make the stables." Fargo was whispering that to them when the next lull came. "Maybe I can hold them back."

"It's plain suicide, Bart," warned Bullard. "Gawd A'mighty man, they'll cut you down 'fore yo've gone ten feet."

But it was the only way. To stay here meant that everybody would soon roast in those creeping flames.

He started in spite of them. With his rifle strapped to his back and his six-shooters filling his hands, he made Bullard handle the door for him. In a wild, rushing leap, he was outside. He was so quick that it seemed to startle the rustlers into holding their fire until after he had made seven or eight wild leaps toward the corrals and then stables.

Then, with a rush of shots, everybody was firing at him. Bullets tore up the earth around him. They slapped flying splinters from the poles of the main corral when he slipped through them. He blazed away at one man he saw rise out of the shadows. The man whirled like a spinning top on one heel, and plunged to the ground.

Fargo went down an instant later, right leg dead beneath him. He came up firing, rocking himself forward, the leg a numb club beneath him. At the dark hallway of the stables he fell again, going to his knees as men appeared in front of him. He dropped two, and saw a third man break to run. He turned him, stumbling him into a stable to the right, and then he was going on.

He stumbled into a doorway, and found himself in a run-down saddle-room. Something in the darkness ahead of him caught his eye. He rocked to the left just in time to avoid a licking flame from the muzzle of a six-shooter. By the flash of the

weapon, he recognized the man holding the gun.

The next instant they were together; two rolling, snarling and clawing things on the floor. Fargo's leg refused to be of any help to him, and he was suddenly on his back with a cursing and hissing thing atop of him and desperately trying to claw his eyes out.

It was the sheriff of Jerkline, and the man was like a tiger, a great cat in a death struggle with a lion. Fargo twisted his head to the right and left, avoiding those clutching fingers gouging at his eyes while the sheriff's left hand now closed on his throat.

They came up fighting. Fargo slammed that numb leg behind him as a prop, and drove his fist to the pit of the sheriff's stomach. A grunt came from the man, and then they were down again, that powerful left hand still clutching Fargo's throat, the fingers digging in deeply, the man's breath hissing above him.

In another desperate lunge, Fargo threw the sheriff from him. He went back against the wall, dropping to his hands and knees. Fargo was up on his hands and knees. Like two fighting animals they faced each other again. Both seemed to have forgotten that they had dropped their guns, but in the growing light from the old cabin finding its way in through a window, Fargo saw the sheriff's hand streak forward and close on some bright object on the floor.

It was one of Fargo's own six-shooters, but no sooner had that hand closed upon the gun than Fargo was upon him. He drove him down face-forward to the floor, looped one arm under his throat from behind, and hurled him up and across the room.

But Jasper Hutch had not dropped the gun. He fired as he struck the wall, but his foot slipped into a hole, wrenching him to the right and spoiling his aim. By the flash of the weapon, Fargo saw another gun lying there a foot from his hand. It was one of Jasper Hutch's weapons, and the bullet that suddenly roared from its muzzle struck the sheriff in the forehead. He gasped, and fell, his foot still in the hole and holding him there to the spot.

FARGO loaded his weapons and the sheriffs. Then his thoughts raced back to the people in the cabin. But something out there in the west end of the hallway had caught his eye.

Hobbling along, pausing here and there to fire through a crack at a distant flame suddenly licking out in the darkness, he came to the thing he was looking for. It was an enormous old watering trough, one dug out of a giant cottonwood log. As he felt over it, he found it to be about four inches thick, the wood so hard-seasoned it was like iron and smooth enough to turn almost any bullet.

It was a wild idea, but he was willing to try anything. He rolled the trough from its rack. Evidently it had not been used for years. It was as dry as a bone, and as heavy as lead. Only a man driven to desperation would have tried what followed.

For it was man-killing labor. He got under the trough. Pain was taking the place of numbness in his leg now, and his boot was full of blood. Like some giant snail, he started working his way back to the burning cabin, moving along a few feet at a time, crawling with that ungodly load on his back.

Shots tore at the old trough. He heard the bullets strike it, heard them slap and cry away in the air as they struck. He kept on with dogged determination, and reached the bullet-splintered cabin door. It took a minute for him to get Bullard to open it.

"Gawd A'mighty!" exclaimed the

old man, staring at him with pop eyes as he wormed his way through the door. "What in hell ever gave you that idea?"

"You'll take anything in a pinch," winced Fargo. "Come on, Mary Lou. I'll take you first."

He took her, and it was like living death worming his way back even with the girl helping him. With two big guns in her hands, he left her there in the safety of the stables, and again dragged himself back to the flaming cabin.

"You can't do it agin!" bellowed the enraged Bullard when he had made his second trip. "Leave the dead lie, an' I'll just put a bullet through this Handsome Frank's skull an' call it a hossthief's end."

But he would have none of that. He kept up the killing job. On the way back to the stables with the whimpering Handsome Frank, he fainted. The rustler would have deserted him had not terror held him there until Fargo stirred himself to life again, and they wiggled on with the bullets slapping and crying.

Bullard was the last man left then, Bullard and the bodies of Bensen and Ludwig. Fargo saw that he would have to hurry. The cabin looked as if it would start caving in at any moment. He was starting back with the girl, her father and Old Jim trying to cover them with their firing, and then he saw Bullard. The old man appeared in the burning doorway with the body of a man in either arm.

Men yelled. It was almost like a cheer. Oklahoma Sam Bullard yowled back at them. Then, legs working like pistons, he was coming, the dead men in his arms protecting him. He charged through the corral gate, right on into the hallway, and dropped his dead men to the ground with a yell of triumph.

"Made 'er!" he yowled. "Not a scratch on me!"

FAINT streaks of dawn light finally appeared in the east. The fight was still going on. The little group there in the stables were still holding their own, and the old cabin was gone, only a smoking and smouldering mass of charred blackness out there.

The circling line of men fell back and crept forward time after time.

"She's good enough to ride for anybody's ruction!" yelled Bullard. "Gal, yo're a fightin' hell-cat."

For an hour it was like that, and then the firing was increasing. With the firing came the low, rolling thunder of hoofs literally tearing up the canyon floor. A wail of voices lifted from the rustlers. Shouts and cries were flung back and forth. Men got up to run, and the little group there in the stables knocked three of them down with their bullets and sent them rolling in the rocks and grass.

No one in the stables understood it for a few moments. It merely looked as if the rustlers had gone crazy out there. Then big-hatted men were appearing, guns thundering in their hands, a horse going down here and there. It was that way to southward. It was that way to northward, blue hell suddenly let loose at the world; a line of fighting hellions throwing a larger circle around the circle of rustlers.

"Look!" cried the girl. "Look, Bart! Dad—everybody!"

A rocking figure in a saddle had appeared. His head was in a bloody bandage, and blood covered the side of his chest. He was riding with one hand gripping his saddle horn. The other held his reins.

"Shorty!" bellowed McBride. "You knock-kneed, spavin-jointed, bald-headed runt! Look at 'em come! Look at 'em come!"

"There! There!" cried the girl. "Our men, Dad, Wishbone men! Turkey Trackers—the whole rangelands must be here!"

IT WAS a bloody mess before it was done. Many of the rustlers fought until the last breath remained in them.

Fargo and Bullard kept out of it, leaving it all up to the riders the wounded Shorty Miller had brought drumming into the canyon at his heels. They had seen enough blood. It was time for them to move on, and even with his leg paining like forty hells, Fargo gave Bullard the nod and a wink.

Bullard helped him when they slipped out the back hallway. They kept on until they were out of sight. Bullard left him at the foot of a little knoll surrounded by jackpines, and blundered away in search of their horses.

"That purty gal's goin' to be mighty sorry," grumbled Bullard when he returned with their horses. "She is, Bart. An', anyhow, how's that leg?"

"Blood's stopped. We'll take care of it later."

Bullard stared at him with a frown. Fargo had taken the Paint Rock Kid's old chime watch from his pocket. The sousing in the river hadn't harmed it, for low, soft chimes came from it when Fargo held it to his ear, a slow smile etching itself across his face. When the chimes ceased, he pocketed the watch, and Bullard helped him into his saddle.

"It was nice knowing the McBrides." He turned and lifted his hat toward the corrals. "Nice to know a really decent girl again, even if it was only for a little while. Let's blow, pardner."

"Only you ain't blowing!" rasped a voice, and Fighting Bill McBride stepped out of the thick foliage to their left. "Nary word of it! You'd come here and take me out of the worst fix a man could be—could be in," the man's voice broke into a husky whisper, "and—and then you'd ride on without giving me a chance to—to thank you. By God, no!"

"We figured," began Fargo, "that maybe—"

"You don't need to figure!" It looked like McBride was on the verge of tears. "My Johnny's gone, but—but you ain't. There's room in Iron Tail for two roosters like you—"

"And back to Iron Tail with us you're going!" cried another voice as Mary Lou McBride came darting out of the pines. "Oh, can't you see that you mustn't go away now?" She darted to Fargo's side, placing her hand on his knee, and something moist and shiny shone in her eyes as she looked up at him. "Don't go—please!"

"Ma'am," he reached down and caught her firmly by her quivering chin, and looked straight into her eyes, "when you and your father put it as you have, I— Well, maybe you'd better slide up behind me. It's quite a walk back to the corrals. . . ."

Trouble at Sassafras Bend

By Leon Byrne

Big Lem and Little Oakie had more than mud in their eyes when they drank a toast to Ollie Grimshaw's six-gun salivation!

His forty-five roared, and three buttons vanished from the rattler's tail.

"TOWN ahead," said Little Oakie, nudging his stallion to a trot.

"Uh huh." Big Lem, his partner, mopped a gill of perspiration from his sweat-streaked face. "Shore hope it's Sassyfras Bend. I'm dry as a bone inside." He eyed the diminutive man riding beside him with glum disapproval. "That was a dang fool trick of yours, filling one of the canteens with water afore we left Gila Springs. Didn't you realize we was liable t' get thirsty afore we got there?"

"Shore I realized it," replied Little Oakie with pepper in his voice, "but I didn't know I had a sheepwit travelin' with me. Balanced rations, that's my motto, and that's what we set out with. A two-quart canteen of drinkin' likker and a two-quart canteen of washin' water. Can I help it

if you washed yore hands out of the wrong canteen last night?"

Big Lem groaned at the memory. "Serves me right fer gettin' dandified," he said. "The idea—a grown man washin' his hands more'n once a day. You *shore* that whisky can's empty?"

Little Oakie impatiently reined his stallion to a stop. "Always gotta be showed, don't you?" he growled. "Here, look." He reached down, pulled up one of the canteens hung from the pommel of his saddle, unscrewed the cap and turned the container upside down with a violent gesture. Half a cupful of amber liquid spilled out onto the dry sand. Little Oakie's eyes bugged out and his grizzled mustache quivered like an agitated cat's whiskers.

"Well, kin you tie that!" he said in amazement. "I could have swore that was empty." Then, to cover his chagrin, he turned furiously on his hulking companion. "See what you went and done," he snarled. "Got me so discumfuddled with yore dang idioticalness—"

Big Lem shook his head sadly. "To think," he said, "that my old sidekick would throw me down like that. Turnin' White Ribboner on me," he muttered. "An' me ridin' the seat out of my pants just to keep him company on a dang fool chase." Big Lem could not get angry all over all at once—there was too much of him—but his perpetual mild annoyance at his pint-size partner showed as they again set out at a jog trot toward the distant cluster of buildings.

"I don't see," he grumbled, "why you didn't write a letter t' this Grimshaw feller, instead of ridin' all the way over here t' Pinyon County just to tell him he kin keep his ranch."

"You know dang well I can't write, no more than you can," said Little Oakie. "Besides, I want to apologize in person to him fer Uncle Ned's orneriness. Kin you imagine," he snorted, "threatenin' to take a man's ranch away from him just because he owes you some money!"

"How much did he owe yore uncle, Oakie?"

"Only a few hundred dollars, I think. All I know about it is what them lawyers from Albuquerque told me last week—that Uncle Ned had gone to his Heavenly reward. Heavenly reward, hell! Anyway, they said I was named the sole air, whatever that means, and they plunked that wad of bills in my hand—that reminds me, I gotta remember to count 'em sometime—and they said as how Uncle Ned's last words was for me to come up here to Sassyfras Bend and collect this note Ollie Grimshaw owed Uncle Ned.

"The note's due tomorrow, and if Grimshaw can't pay, Uncle Ned said fer me to kick him off his ranch and take it over." Little Oakie spat in disgust. "*That's* how Uncle Ned went about earnin' his Heavenly reward."

"Must have been a mean old cuss," said Big Lem.

"Mean? Why the old coyote was too plumb ornery to die at a decent age. Imagine a old polecat like that pollutin' the good air of this earth till he was ninety-four. They say he died with his pants on and his hands in his pockets so nobody could get at his wallet. So you see, the least I could do was come up here and apologize personal to this Grimshaw feller, and tell him to fergit about the note. We got enough in this roll," he patted his shirt pocket, "t' buy us beans fer the rest of our lives."

"Yeah," said Big Lem gloomily, "but that roll belongs t' you—and it would be kinda nice to have a ranch and settle down. We ain't as young as we usta be, Oakie."

"What the hell you talkin' about!" stormed the little man. "You know you never be satisfied t' stay in one place more'n a month. And I don't want to hear no more about this here

money. Ain't we always shared and shared alike?"

"Yeah," said Big Lem uncomfortably, "we done that, Oakie." Then his big moon-face brightened. "Well, that canteen ain't going to stay empty long now. I kin count at least five saloon signs down the main street. Which one'll we try?"

"The nearest one, nacherally," said Little Oakie.

AS THEY trotted up and dismounted in front of the Howling Dog Bar and Amusement Palace the few loungers around the hitching rack regarded them with something akin to amazement.

"First I knowed the circus was comin' to town," muttered a lanky cowpoke as Big Lem and Little Oakie plopped to the ground side by side. Little Oakie rode the biggest cowhorse in the Southwest, to make up for his own lack of stature, but even in his high-heeled boots he didn't quite measure up to five feet. He weighed ninety-five, after a full meal. Big Lem was all that Little Oakie wasn't. He stood six feet three in his stocking feet, and although he tipped the beam at two eighty, he wasn't fat.

Little Oakie hitched his twin six-shooters up on his lean bandy-shanks, glared fiercely at the gawking loungers, and strode into the Howling Dog with Lem close at his heels.

"Set 'em up," Oakie ordered the bartender. "A bottle and two glasses —no, not them thimbles—drinkin' glasses. We're thirsty." He poured half a tumbler of whisky neat, shoved the bottle over to Lem. They raised their glasses solemnly, clicked them together.

"Mud in yore eye," said Little Oakie.

"Mud," said Big Lem.

Oakie let the fire-water sizzle down through his esophagus, shook his head to clear the fog from his eyes, and seemed to grow an inch taller. He glowered at the far end of the bar, where a dozen or so men were in heated discussion.

"What's them rannies jawin' about?" he demanded.

"Ain't you heard?" said the bartender. "Strangers, huh? Why, an old skinflint named Ned Oakes loaned Ollie Grimshaw some money, and it's due tomorrow, and Ollie probably won't be able to pay, and old Oakes sent a letter sayin' he was goin' to take over Ollie's place, and the boys are a bit riled up, and talkin' of a hemp-stretchin' party."

"They are, are they?" Little Oakie poured himself another drink and downed it. "I'll settle that quick enough. Fact of the matter, that's what me and my sidekick Lem came up here about. I'm Seth Oakes, old Ned's nevview—"

"Oh, so you're Seth Oakes, are you? Well now, I'm shore the boys'll be right glad to meetcha." The bartender raised his voice. "Fellers," he bellowed, "this here pipesqueak says he's Seth Oakes, come up here to take over Ollie's ranch. Step right up and meet the varmint."

"Now wait a minute," said Little Oakie aggrievedly, "I didn't say—" but his voice was drowned in the sudden roar of twelve angry voices. Twelve black-browed cowmen turned from the bar in unison and started toward the spot where Lem and Oakie stood. A young curly-headed puncher pushed ahead of the rest.

"If yo're half a man, stranger," he began, "you'll give Ollie a chance t' get th' money together. Ollie's had a run o' bad luck—"

"I'm aimin' to tell you," snorted Little Oakie, "that I come all the way up here just a-purpose—"

A beefy, blue-jawed buckeroo elbowed the curly-headed youngster aside. "Lemme handle this, Red," he growled. "Listen, you," he poked a pudgy forefinger in Oakie's ribs, "yo're not tellin' us anything; we're

tellin' you. You've got just sixty seconds to git on yore flea-bitten nags and high-tail it outta town."

Little Oakie's mustache began to tremble at the ends. "Keep yore paws offen me, you polecat," he snarled, "or I'll salivate you! If you'll shut that big mouth o' yourn a minute and lemme explain—"

"Yore explainin' days are over, you little toad," the beefy puncher said. "Come on, boys, let's show 'em how we treat Shylocks in Sassafras Bend," and he reached out to lay violent hands on Oakie.

Little Oakie hopped back a pace, slapped his thighs and came up with two six-shooters that looked almost as big as himself. "Stand where you are!" he yelled. "I'll plug the first man—"

An overloaded gobboon, juicy end to, sailed through the air from the rear of the throng. Little Oakie stopped the upper rim with his forehead, the lower rim with his teeth, and as he went down he made a queer gurgling sound. Then, as the crowd closed in, Big Lem heaved a profound sigh, reached out and seized the two nearest heads. There was a *pop* like a cork being drawn from an overcharged bottle as he brought the two heads together.

Lem tucked the glassy-eyed redhead between his legs as he threw the beefy man. He grunted with disapproval when the hurtling form bowled over only three of the Sassafras Benders, but his aim was better with the red-head. Then he stepped carefully over the fallen warrior at his feet—Little Oakie looked like a Comanche whose warpaint had started to run—and picked up a chair.

That didn't work at all—it splintered completely on the first head he cracked it over—and he was beginning to wonder what he could use for ammunition, eyeing the bar speculatively to decide whether it could be up-ended, when the problem was solved for him. Three of the more daring but less prudent Sassafras Benders jumped him from behind.

Lem reached back, picked them off one by one, and hurled them, the last one's boots flying off as he sailed through the air. Lem was begining to relax, now, and enjoy himself, and he stooped over and pulled a leg from a poker table. When he straightened up he looked around a trifle bewilderedly, for he was standing alone in the middle of the Howling Dog. Those of the Sassafras Benders who were still conscious were running or crawling toward both doors, front and back.

"That's funny," Lem muttered, "I thought we was just gettin' started." He headed back toward Little Oakie. "These Sassyfras Benders shore tire easy—must be they don't get much exercise around here."

HE PICKED Little Oakie up and stretched him out full length on the bar, took the whisky bottle and shoved it between Oakie's teeth. Little Oakie blinked glassy eyes, choked, sputtered, and sat up.

"Stand where you are!" he shouted. "I'll plug the first man—"

"Lie down," Lem said. "Yo're drunk from tobacco juice. You shore do look like hell, Oakie. Wait a minute." He lumbered out to the hitching rack, came back with a canteen. "Here, gargle some of this."

Little Oakie took a gulp and spat it out. "Aaugg!" he said. "Water!"

"Shore it's water," said Big Lem. "I didn't mean fer you to swaller it —just wash some of that tobacco juice outen you."

"What happened?" Little Oakie demanded, spitting out a tooth that had been knocked halfway down his throat by the cuspidor.

"You forgot t' duck, as usual," said Lem. "Say," he banged the bar with a ponderous fist, "them polecats mighta hurt you, throwin' things

like that. Gits me plumb riled now I come to think of it."

"Good thing you didn't lose yore temper before," said Little Oakie, squinting at the five figures lying in peaceful repose about the floor of the Howling Dog. "There wouldn't 'a been anybody left in Sassyfras Bend t' direct us to the Grimshaw place."

"You mean yo're going out there, Oakie, after the way these inhospitable skunks treated you?"

"Yore dang tootin' I'm goin' out there. Nobody kin bounce a goboon offen Seth Oakes' noggin and git away with it. I'm goin' out there an' clean up the whole damn Grimshaw outfit. I'm—where's m' guns?"

"Here." Big Lem scooped up half a dozen from the floor, "take yore pick." Lem never carried a gun, chiefly, as he put it, "because I can't get my hand around one o' them pea-shooters."

He regarded the canteen dubiously. "No use carryin' this water any farther," he said, "now that we've both washed recent." He turned it upside down. "Go get the other one, Oakie, and we'll fill 'em both with drinkin' likker, then we won't be so liable to get 'em mixed up."

"Yeah," said Little Oakie, "we better be prepared—might be a long way to the Grimshaw place. Where in hell's that bartender?"

A head appeared cautiously above the bar, several feet farther down. "Don't shoot, boys," he pleaded, "I got a mother back east."

"I bet she ain't braggin' about havin' a son out west. Set out four bottles of drinkin' likker while I get the other canteen."

The containers filled and capped, Oakie and Lem looked at each other questioningly.

"Yeah, yo're right," said Oakie. "We better have a short one afore we set out. Another bottle here, you polecat in bartender's clothing."

THREE hours later Big Lem nudged Oakie so violently the little man's jaw rattled where it rested on the bar. "Told you 'm gettin' old," he said. "'M losin' 'm eyesight. Can't even see out th' damn' window."

Little Oakie straightened up with difficulty and craned his neck around.

"Gawd!" he whispered. "I'm goin' blind too. Can't see a danged—hup-*hic!*—thing out there!"

"Sun went down half an hour ago, boys," the bartender informed them.

"Dang queer country around here," Lem mused. "Sun goes down in th' daytime. Likken, Oasie—I mean Lizzen, Oaskie, wasn't we goin' somewheres?"

"Musta been, Lem. Don't seem right we should hafta spend the rest of our days in this rear end o' creation."

"Now looka here, boys," the bartender said, "if I was you I wouldn't go messin' around the Grimshaw place after dark—"

"Gimshraw!" Oakie barked. "That's it! Where's the Gimshraw place? Speak up, you sidewinder, or I'll salivate you!"

"Why it's down the road a coupla miles, first place on the right when you come to the bluff, but I'm warnin' you—"

"Eeeayow!" Little Oakie grabbed up the two canteens. "Bounce a gobboon offen me, will they! C'mon, Lem, you'n and me are gonna carve ourselves some Shimgraw meat!"

Outside, Oakie untied his stallion, reached up for the pommel, and lifted a wavering foot toward the stirrup. The horse was very tall and Oakie was very short, and it was a long reach.

"Dawgone," he muttered, as his foot floundered around up near his chin, "ain't this nag never gonna stop growin'?"

"Here," said Big Lem, "lemme help you. I'll boost you up."

He placed one hand on the scruff

of Oakie's shirt collar, took a firm hold on the seat of Oakie's pants with the other, and heaved. Oakie sailed upward into the cool night air of Sassafras Bend.

Lem turned to mount his own horse, and heard a dull *plop* behind him.

"Can'tcha hold onta nothin', Oakie?" he growled. "You dropped one o' the canteens."

"Canteen hell!" roared Little Oakie, spitting out a mouthful of dust. "You throwed me clean over the horse, you dang fool!" He clambered painfully to his feet. "I'm warnin' you, Lem, some day yo're goin' t' try me too far!"

THE first ranch on the right, two miles out, was completely dark when the two Samaritans-turned-avengers plodded up to its outer precincts and dismounted.

"Looks like a ambush to me," whispered Lem. "They musta got word we was comin'."

"No—hic—Oakes never backed down from no argument," stated Oakie, "ambush or no ambush—C'mon, we'll surround 'em."

There was no sound from the rambling, one story ranchhouse as Lem, stealthily as a drayhorse trotting over a drawbridge, ambled up into the front yard, Oakie zigzagging at his side.

"Wait a minute," hissed Oakie, plopping down behind a fence post. "Git behind me, Lem, so they can't see you and I'll choose 'em and see if they got guts enough to come out and fight." He raised his voice. "Scrimshaw, you varmint, show yerself! Come out an' come out shootin', you yellowbellied sidewinder!" The house remained silent.

"No use," Lem said, straightening up. "We'll hafta rush 'em. Take holda my belt in back, Oakie."

Oakie took hold, and the next instant his feet flew out from under him as Lem was off with a rush and a whoop, thundering across the yard. Lem took the porch step in stride. He was going too fast to open the front door, so he took it with him too, hinges and all, as well as a rocking chair and parlor table that happened to be in his way, and he brought up against the far wall of the room with a crash that buckled the boards. He groped to an uncertain footing in the midst of the wreckage and held the door poised, ready for battle.

"Oakie," he whispered hoarsely, "where are you?"

"Take yore foot offen my ear and lemme up," groaned Oakie. "Ow, you big lummox, that's my stummick! Fer Gawd's sake, light a match, afore you tromple me t' death!"

Lem struck a light, and while Oakie disentangled himself from what was left of the rocking chair, the big man found a lamp and lit it.

"That's funny," he said, looking around, "there ain't nobody home."

"There won't be no home either, if you're loose much longer." Oakie pushed his torn ear back into place. "Well, they gotta come back sometime, so we'll wait right here till they do. Just as well make ourselves comfortable—I'll get the canteens."

"Yeah," Lem agreed. "Might as well be drunk as the way we are now."

When Oakie returned, hugging a sloshing canteen under each arm, a small, furry animal slipped through the open doorway after him, into the room. Oakie regarded it through opaque and startled eyes.

"Whazzat?" he demanded of Lem.

"'Sa puzzycat," said Lem. "Here puzzy." And he reached out a big hand to stroke the animal. The pussycat arched its back and jumped away, making a queer hissing sound.

Big Lem looked hurt. "'S funny," he said. "Dozzen seem to like me. Hizzes at me."

"Sa wonder it doesn't spit at you," Oakie said. "Here, take a swig of—"

He stopped, a startled look coming into his eyes. "Lem," he husked, "there's somethin' dead around here!"

"Phe*yew!*" Big Lem glared reproachfully at Oakie. "Why, you dang little polecat, you might at least 'a gone outside—"

"Polecat?" Oakie repeated. He stared closed at the excited animal that had followed him in. "Jumped up Judas Priest, it *is* a polecat!"

The canteens clattered to the floor as Lem and Oakie dived for the door. They got there at the same time, which was unfortunate for Oakie. He bounced like a rubber ball from the collision, caromed off the wall and landed on his back in the middle of the floor. There was a soft squshing sound beneath him as he went down.

Oakie rolled over groggily, took one look at the flattened remains of the "pussycat" on which he had landed, and started groping his way on hands and knees toward the door. He made it to the edge of the porch, where he started to collapse, then he got a whiff of himself and new life came to him.

He staggered to his feet and started running. The cool breeze in his face soon cleared the fumes from his head and he stopped.

"It's all right, Lem," he called, "I killed—phewie!" and he was off again. He circled the yard three times by stops and starts before he finally gave up and stood there panting.

"It's no use," he said. "Guess I'll have t' live with it the rest of my life."

"First time I ever saw a man tryin' to run away from hisself," Lem, said. "Danged if you don't get some queer notions, Oakie. Well, we might as well go back in. The canteens are still in there—and a dead skunk can't smell no worsen you do."

It was six drinks apiece, or approximately one quart later, that Oakie decided enough was enough. " 'T hell with Grimjaw," he said. "You can wait up all night fer 'im if you want to; I'm gonna turn in."

"Mud," Lem mumbled.

"Huh?"

"I mean hess, Yoakie. I mean—c'mon, les find a bed."

They located a four-poster in a darkened bedroom and crawled wearly into it after hanging the canteens over a foot-post.

FOR a few minutes quiet reigned over the Grimshaw ranch, then Lem muttered: "Hell, forgot t' take off m' necktie."

"You dang dude," Oakie said sleepily, "I didden know you wore a tie."

"I don't." Lem pondered a moment. "Then what th' hell is this around m' neck?"

"Whazzit feel like?"

Lem fumbled at his throat. "Sorta soft, an' round, an' cold. " 'Twiggles."

" 'Twiggles?"

"Yeah, 'twiggles like a snake."

Oakie fumbled a match out of his pocket and scratched it on the wall. "Hol' it over here where I c'n see it, Lem," he said, and as Lem obliged, Oakie went up and over the foot of the bed in a single leap.

"*J-j-jepers!*" he screeched, "you got a rattler by the throat! Fer Gawdsake hold it, Lem; hold it till I get the lamp!" He skittered out into the parlor and dashed back with the lamp in one hand and a six-shooter in the other.

"Hold it out from you, Lem!" Oakie shouted, "and I'll blow its dang head off!" His forty-five roared, and three buttons vanished from the end of the rattler's tail.

"I don't think you need t' shoot any more, Oakie," said Lem, wiping the perspiration from his forehead. "I guess I held it too tight an' broke its neck. See, 'taint wigglin' any more." He stepped gingerly to the open window and threw the defunct rattler out onto the ground.

"Sometimes they come back t' life," Oakie said. "I'll plug it once more 't make sure." And he leaned out the window and blazed away. On the heels of the report came the hollow roar of a gun from the distance, and Lem and Oakie ducked for the shelter of the window sill.

"Surrounded!" Oakie unholstered his second six-shooter and began pumping lead in the direction of the distant shot. The faster he fired, the faster came the reports from the distance.

"There's a dozen of 'em, at least!" Oakie panted. "Here, take m' cartridge belt and load one gun while I fire the other! Mebbe we kin hold 'em off till mornin'."

"Not with this belt, we won't," Lem said. "You forgot t' fill it."

"The guns are empty too," Oakie groaned. "They got us, Lem, they got us!" He held out a hand impulsively. "G'bye, Lem, old pard! We'll go down fightin'!"

They shook. "Bring 'em on," growled Lem.

The distant firing had stopped, and Oakie raised his head above the sill to bellow a stentorian taunt. "Come on, you horse thieves!" he shouted. "Come an' get us!"

". . . get us!" came an answering taunt from the distance.

"Why, you yellow bellied pack rats!" Oakie howled. "Come in here an' we'll massacree you!"

" . . . massacree you!" came the answering howl.

Lem, who had been squinting out into the night, suddenly said, "Lissen, Oakie, ain't them cliffs right over there?"

"Yeah," said Oakie. "Why?"

Lem lumbered to his feet with a snort of disgust. "Now I know yo're crazy," he growled. "First you try t' run away from yorself, then you shoot hell out of a echo!" He helped himself to a hearty pull out of one of the canteens, and felt better.

"Oakie," he said, passing the canteen over, "there's somethin' queer about this house. First it's skunks, then it's rattlers. This feller Grimshaw can't be leading the right kind of life. Personal, I think I'll bed down in the barn fer the rest of the night."

"I guess yo're right, Lem," Oakie agreed. "My nerves can't stand much more strain tonight neither."

"I was hopin'," Lem muttered, "t' have some privacy. You don't smell no sweeter as time goes on, Oakie. Still," he sighed, "if I leave you here, no tellin' what dang fool mess you'd get yoreself into before mornin'. Put out th' light an' bring th' canteens. C'mon."

LITTLE Oakie was too bone-weary and oggle-eyed to reply to these insults, and he trudged spraddle-legged after Lem as they left the house and headed toward the sanctuary of the barn.

"Always did feel more nacheral in a barn anyway," he mumbled as Lem stooped over to fidget at the barn door.

"Yeah," Lem said, "there's no place like home. What the hell's holdin' this door, anyway? Oh, 'sonly a padlock." He wrapped both hands around the lock, braced a foot against the door, and heaved. He bounded back three feet when the staple holding the lock gave way, and Little Oakie, who was standing directly behind him, bounded back ten.

"Lem," Oakie muttered as he picked himself up, "the day is comin' —"

"You think they had somethin' in here worth stealin'," said Lem, "puttin' a lock on the door. 'S black as sin in here, Oakie. Light a match."

"Aint got no more matches."

"Can't see m' hand before m' face," grumbled Oakie. He sniffed audibly. "Good thing m' nose is still workin'. I kin smell a haymow over there. C'mon, Lem. Kin you follow me?"

"A blind man could follow you."

As they stumbled forward there was a low growl and the rattling of a chain from the floor on their left.

"Kin you beat that Shimgraw fer orneriness," said Oakie, "leavin' a pore dog tied up in here. Oughta be —*Yow!*"—he kicked out viciously in the darkness—"Bite me, will you, you varmint!"

"Where'd he bite you, Oakie?"

"Won't be able t' sit down fer a week," mourned Oakie.

"Oh, well, here's some hay; you kin at least lie down." They hunkered down on the soft pallet and stretched out luxuriously.

Lem was soon asleep and Oakie, disdainful of his companion's apparent lack of stamina, unscrewed a canteen lid and raised it to his lips. But before he could partake of its contents his head rolled slowly and peacefully to one side.

TEN feet away, a squat, bulky object raised itself from the floor of the barn and lumbered silently toward the sleeping pair. It sniffed at Oakie's mustache and put out an exploring tongue.

"G'way," growled Oakie.

The tongue ran over Oakie's cheek and ear, and the little man sat up abruptly. "Lem," he snarled, "men've died fer lessen that."

"Huh?"

The query came from the other side of Oakie, and he jerked his head around. "Is there two of you?" he demanded.

"Who, me? No," said Lem, "only one."

"Then who in hell's this other jasper?"

"Mus' be Scrimjaw. Lemme at 'im!"

Lem rose to his knees and swung a roundhouse right at the dim bulk looming over Oakie. There was a startled grunt from the darkness as his fist crunched against bone, and the next instant Lem's head buzzed as he received a clout behind the ear that sent him sprawling.

"Oh, so you want t' mix it, do you?" he growled, and he lunged headlong to the fray.

All his life Lem had longed to meet someone who could stand up to him for at least a few minutes in a rough and tumble battle, and now his wish was fulfilled. It was more than fulfilled, for at the end of thirty seconds' furious punching, kicking, and clawing, Lem had lost his shirt, one shoe, two yards of hide off his side, and one eyebrow.

"Jehosephat!" he grunted. "Toughest hombre I ever tangled with. Oakie, will you get th' hell out from underfoot so I kin get m' balance!"

Muttering inarticulately to himself, Oakie crawled a few feet away, and began pushing at his jaw, which had become discolated while he was at the bottom of the heap.

"Bite me, will you!" howled Lem. "Claw me, will you! I'll break every dam bone in yore body—*oof!—yeeow!* —leggo my neck! *Halp!*"

At that moment Oakie's jaw snapped back into place and he let out a blood curdling screech. "Lem! Let go of it! It's a bar!"

"Let go of it hell!" Lem panted. "Tell it to let go of me!"

Then the struggling ball of fury flew apart, the bear half of it heading in one direction, Lem charging off in the other.

It was the first time Lem had ever run from anything, but he did remarkably well for an amateur. Head down, shoulders hunched, he surged forward like a battering ram, and like a battering ram he struck the boards of a cage-like structure at the rear of the barn, knocking a four-foot-square hole in it.

Lem's head and shoulders came to rest inside the hole, the other half of him remained outside, and his battle-scarred body served as a runway for the two snarling, spitting furies

that surged through the opening and out into the main arena of the barn.

Little Oakie, standing in the center of the structure, bleated like a lost lamb, undecided which way to run, but he had no choice in the matter. The bear, having reversed its direction, hit him from the rear. The two wildcats Lem had freed from their cage hit him from the front, and Oakie became the hub of a howling, growling, fur-ripping free for all.

It was a clout from the bear's paw that saved him from complete annihilation, for it knocked him spinning, ten feet away, and he landed running. He had not taken two steps when he smacked into something hard and unyielding. It was one of the center poles supporting the rafters, and he started shinnying up it.

He was halfway up when he felt the pole tremble, and something clawed at his foot. He yipped with fright and kicked downward.

"Mmmph!"—it was the voice of Lem below him—"take yore foot outta my mouth an' get goin', fer the love of—"

They made it to a cross-beam, drew themselves over it, and hung there, listening to the sound and the fury below. It was a good fight while it lasted, but the two wildcats evidently decided that enough was enough, for the two listeners up above suddenly saw the crack of light at the barn door widen, and two tawny forms bounded out into the night and vanished from sight.

There was silence for a moment, then came the sound of an inquisitive paw clawing at a canteen, followed by a gurgling, a grunt of surprise, and then a steady lapping. What went on below after that, Lem and Oakie could only guess, but there was something that sounded suspiciously like a hiccough, the noise of a heavy body blundering into a wall, a long and heartfelt sigh, then a steady, rumbling snore.

OAKIE, despite his grim determination to hang on, was just starting to slip off the cross-beam when Lem pulled him back.

"Somebody comin'!" Lem hissed.

Oakie opened bleary eyes, saw that gray daylight had crept into the barn, and looked downward. A half-grown brown bear was curled up in peaceful sleep beside a flattened canteen. Near the door a gray timber wolf gnawed with hopeful patience at the heavy chain attached to his collar. From outside came the clippety-clop of hoofs as a rider drew up to the house.

Lem and Oakie could hear a startled exclamation as the rider dismounted and entered the house, and a moment later running footsteps approached the barn. A chestnut-haired girl in riding breeches burst through the barn door. She gasped in surprise as she saw the splintered cage and her eyes widened as she looked up and saw the two disconsolate figures clinging to the cross-beam.

"Oh!" she exclaimed, "did the animals try to get at you?"

Oakie made an effort to speak, but his voice was only a hollow croak. "Ma'am," he said, "they didn't only try, they plumb succeeded."

The girl started to laugh, but the woebegone look on Oakie's face checked her. "Oh, you poor dears," she said. "You can come down now, though. You see, Sammy and Fang, here," she indicated the bear and the wolf, "are both on chains. Sammy is tame, anyway, and I'm sure he wouldn't harm a mouse."

As Lem and Oakie slid stiff-jointed and battle-wracked to the ground, the girl looked about her unhappily, and her lower lip quivered. "I suppose I'll never see the cats again," she said, "and the skunks and rattlers all got away, and—oh, it doesn't matter now anyway, and I shouldn't stand here talking about my own troubles when you two men must be in such

pain. You see, I'm—" She hesitated.

"Beggin' yore pardon a minute, ma'am," Oakie interrupted, "d'you mean t' tell me you keep all these critters here a-purpose?"

"Why, yes," she said. "It may seem unusual, but when father died I knew I couldn't hope to run a regular ranch by myself, so I started a little business of my own, handling wild animals. I trap them myself, and whenever any of the Sassafras Bend boys round up any they bring them to me, and I ship them back east. I had a good chance of making a go of it, but I foolishly borrowed some money from Ned Oakes, and gave a note, and it's due today, and I can't meet it. I've been over to Carson County to see if an old friend of father's could help me, but—"

"Beggin' yore pardon jist once more," said Oakie, "could I ask yore name, ma'am?"

"Oh," she made a brave effort to smile, "I'm sorry I was so full of my own problems that I forgot to introduce myself. I'm Olive Grimshaw—the boys around here call me Ollie. I'm afraid I haven't met you two before—"

"I'm—" Lem began, but he stopped abruptly as Oakie's heel caught him in the shin. Oakie reached for his shirt pocket.

"We're just a couple of rannies who was passin' by," said Oakie, slipping the band off the roll of greenbacks in his hand. "Now, jist how much did this polecat lend you?"

"Why, it was only two hundred dollars," Olive Grimshaw said, her eyes widening in surprise, "but I couldn't think of letting strangers help me. I'm afraid there's nothing to do but turn the ranch over to Mr. Oakes—"

"No! No!" Little Oakie shuddered violently. "Mister Oakes don't never want to hear of yore ranch again, In fact, he sent me up here—" Oakie was shuffling nervously through the roll of bills—"Dawgone," he muttered, "if this ain't embarrassin' nothin' left but thousand dollar bills, and I never met a bartender yet who could change one—"

He thrust one of the notes into the startled girl's hand. "Mister Oakes sent me up here," he went on firmly, "t' give you that, and t' tell you t' forget about the note. C'mon, Lem, you'n me has got t' see a man about a howling dog."

"But—" the girl protested, "I can't take this—"

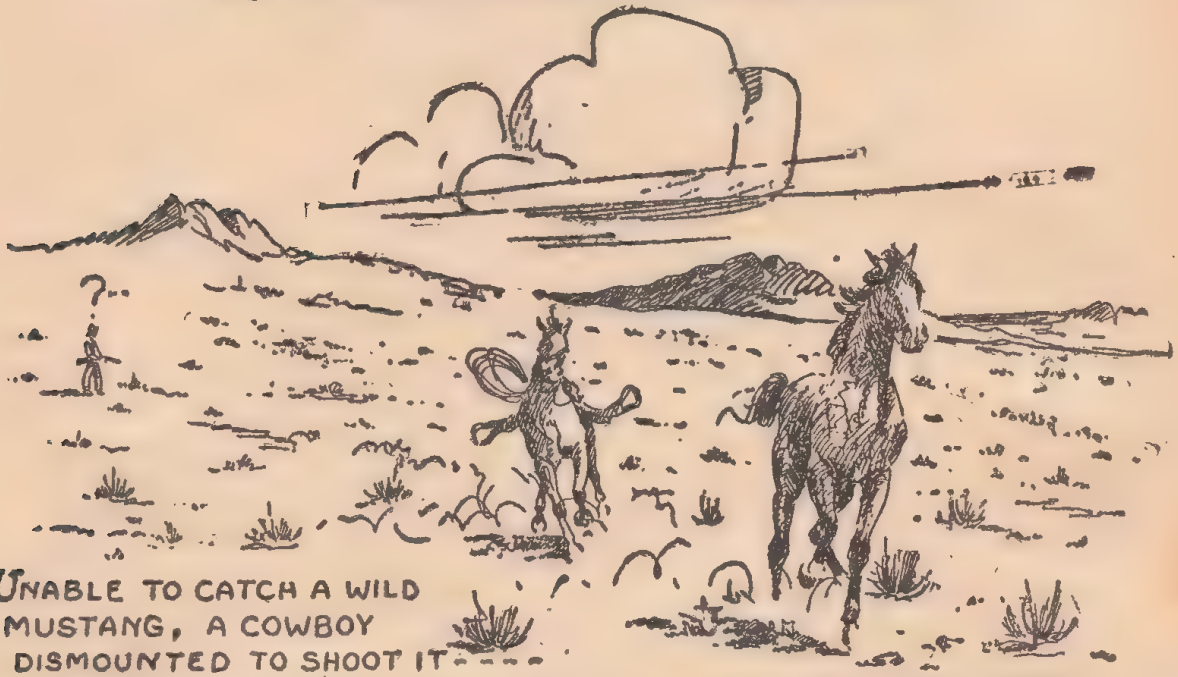
Little Oakie was not listening. He had retrieved the undamaged canteen and was heading toward his horse.

As the two weary, tattered figures bounced along at a jog trot toward the caravanserais of Sassafrass Bend, the big man turned disconsolately to his diminutive companion.

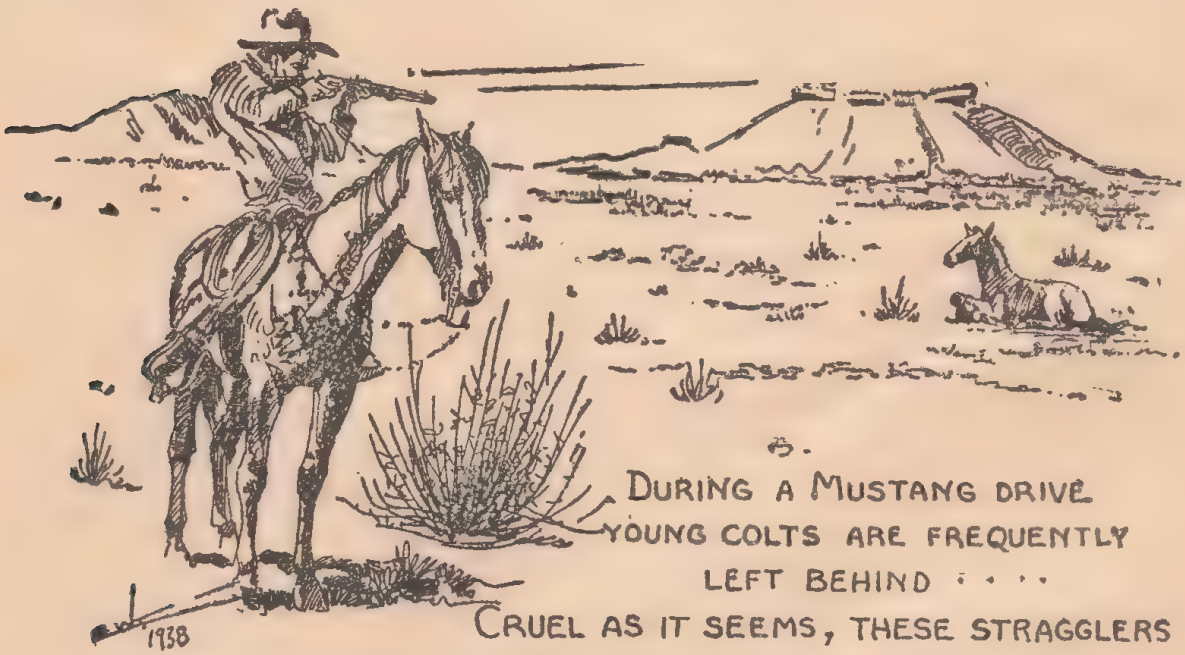
"Oakie," he said, "are you *shore* that canteen's empty?"

Cow Country Savvy

By E. W. THISTLETHWAITE



UNABLE TO CATCH A WILD MUSTANG, A COWBOY DISMOUNTED TO SHOOT IT - - - - HE FIRED ONE SHOT AND MISSED, WHEREUPON HIS HORSE TOOK AFTER THE MUSTANG AND, WITHOUT ANY RIDER, HAZED IT INTO THE CORRAL — SOME 20 MILES! McDERMITT, NEV.



DURING A MUSTANG DRIVE YOUNG COLTS ARE FREQUENTLY LEFT BEHIND . . . . CRUEL AS IT SEEMS, THESE STRAGGLERS HAVE TO BE SHOT BECAUSE, EVEN IF BROUGHT IN LATER, THEIR MOTHERS WILL RARELY CLAIM THEM

An Action-packed Novelette

Fire-Headed

Shasta Duane was a fighting fool who would never change—unless smokepole savvy salivated him.

CHAPTER I

Two-Gun Maverick!

THERE was no brass band to welcome Shasta Duane. These days, the town of Aerie and the surrounding country had more trouble than it could command. A fire-headed, fighting fool like Shasta Duane, therefore wasn't to be received with open arms.

Maybe, after a three years' absence, Shasta Duane sensed how things were running: boogery, dark, suspicious. Maybe he should have returned without the worn .45 thonged on his right leg, or the mocking, go-to-hell fire in his blue eyes.

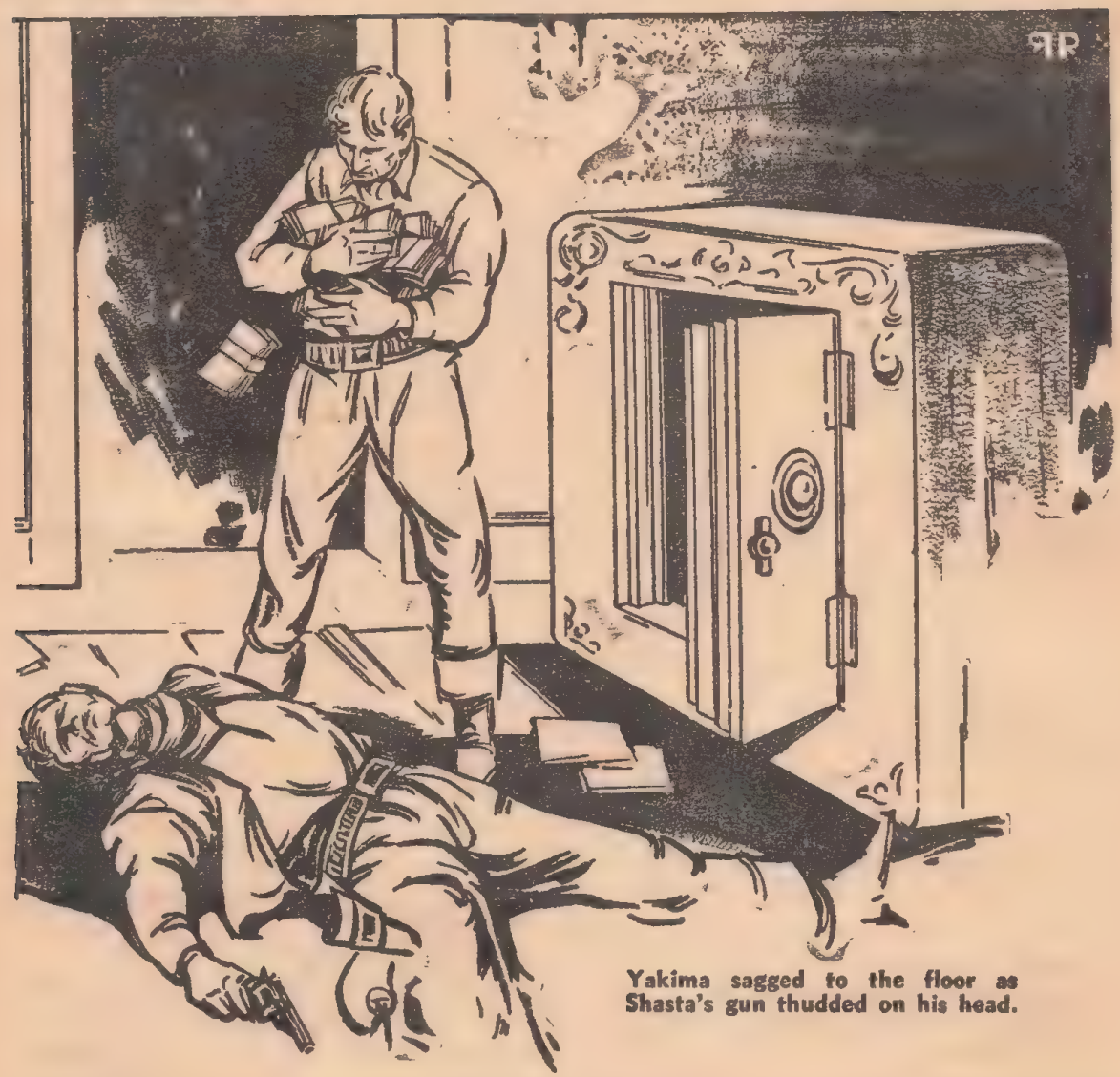
But the gun was there; and that dancing, devil's light.

Aerie was quiet. Buckboards, a few saddled horses, a light wagon were lined at the long rail in front of the Eagle House. It was "store day" in town, and folks would use this noon hour to eat a boneroo meal and chew an hour's gossip in the Eagle House diningroom.

Through the silence of these high uplands, the ring of a blacksmith's anvil came sharp, lonely. Against the odor of yellow pine, there was a sharper smell of liver and onions. It was a perfume that seemed to hold a lone occupant in view, and as Duane left his saddle gelding and his packhorse at the end of the livery line, his attention was on that man.

Fool

By JAMES P. OLSEN



Yakima sagged to the floor as Shasta's gun thudded on his head.

He was thin, with great, feverish dark eyes sunk in his head; a head, that for all the skinny body in a ragged, too-large "store" suit, was held at an angle of defiance to the world.

The man sniffed and his hands trembled. Unconsciously, he moved to the steps of the Eagle House and again inhaled the odor of food. A sort of lump cinched itself in Duane's throat, and he dragged a mental loop toward roping an excuse to ask this out-of-place pilgrim to light down and have chuck with him.

He moved between his horses, momentarily out of sight of yet another man who banged open the screen door and came out and crossed the porch fronting the Eagle House. He was a tall, darkly arrogant man, a cream-colored Stetson topping immaculate, fancy garb; finery touched off by matched pistols in a tooled, double-decked belt. A flowing Windsor tie fluttered as he bulled down the steps, his manner of going suggesting here was one who expected ordinary mortals to get to hell aside for him.

The sickly man, agonized at the smell of food, didn't move quickly,

and he stumbled when he did start to pull aside. He staggered into the other, jostled him off the walk into the dust.

"You damn bum!" he snarled. "Weren't you told to get out of town? Now—Bigod, maybe this'll teach you!"

Shasta Duane was ducking under the hitchrail when the small man caught the cutting, backhanded blow squarely across the mouth. He seemed to collapse in every joint as he hit the ground. The other drew back a highly polished boot, aiming the pointed toe of it toward the small one's ribs.

"Ranse Holabird!" Duane spat. His left hand clamped the dark man's shoulder and spun him half around. Duane's right came over and landed flush on Holabird's open mouth.

"Who—" Holabird started to croak. He stiffened, his eyes set, he loosed a curse with the tooth he spat out.

"Duane!" he squawked. His elbows hitched backward.

Duane moved in, sliding feet raising a cloud of dust. A clubbing blow seemed to bend Holabird's nose off to one side, and a driving fist to the stomach jerked his arms wide, his clawing fingers missing the pearl butt plates of his guns.

"Damn you!" he sobbed and swung a kick at Duane.

Duane's hat rolled into the dust and his red hair flamed a wild, unruly flag of battle. His mouth widened in a grin that bade fair to split his freckled face in half. Enjoyment of a good fight was doubled; and if he had to start trouble to announce his return to Aerie, he'd rather it was with Ranse Holabird than any other ten men he could name.

He moved aside, and Holabird's boot missed its mark. Duane grabbed that foot, spun Holabird around and off balance, grabbed the back of his coat and deliberately split it from collar to tail. Holabird screeched insanely and spun, bogged his head and came at Duane, cursing, clawing, slugging blindly.

Duane danced backward and around in a close circle, whipping short, cutting blows to the other's bleeding face. "Here's one because you ain't no huddem good," he taunted. "Have this'n because I just plain don't like you. An' this—" he moved back for measuring space—"for that poor pilgrim you plunked down!"

Meaty, sodden, hard knuckles straightened Holabird, rocked him back, skidded him in the dust before the butchering sounds died out.

DUANE stepped back, rubbing the knuckle of his right trigger finger against his nose. The screen door was banging and boots were pounding on the porch. Duane stepped out of his little haze of dust and turned bright eyes toward the folks piling out of the Eagle House.

Red-faced Sheriff Lud Bates came toward him. And there was Clay Dixon, of the CD spread, and old Asia Yale, McIvry and Long—all ranchers. Duane's quick attention encompassed them, then shut them out. All of his interest was for the trim, slender figure of old Clay's daughter, Maureen, framed in the doorway.

For an instant, the girl beamed and her red lips parted. She was like a lamp that has a torch thrust against the new-trimmed wick. She raised one hand impulsively toward him. Then the light went out, her hand fell at her side. She was looking at Ranse Holabird, a beaten, torn, filthy figure that rocked on rubbery legs. Maureen Dixon seemed to choke, and her look at Duane was one of misery, disappointment.

"What is it, Holabird?" Lud Bates was bawling.

"This damned hellion attacked me

from the rear," Holabird snarled. He looked toward Maureen, and Duane sensed that Holabird would hate him now, with a hate that would be deadly and consuming. It wasn't good to be made such a figure in a woman's eyes.

For the first time, Lud Bates really saw Duane. The fat officer stopped, puffed out his cheeks, exploded. "Shasta Duane! Bigod, it's been three years since you left here—you fire-headed hellion. Now you hit town, an' you do Holabird dirt first thing. You hit your saddle an' ride right out of here—if Holabird don't want to prefer charges against you."

"Maybe Holabird'd like to go in court an' say I popped him because he'd hit that little feller over there?" Duane pointed to the shabby figure who now stood well away from them. "An' was goin' to put a boot to him."

"That's a lie!" Holabird snarled. He fell back a step when Duane's lips made a thin line. Lud Bates stepped between them. In the eyes of old Clay Dixon was a glimmer of concealed interest. He exchanged glances with Asia Yale. Yale was grinning.

"It isn't a lie, officer." The little man tottered up.

"You doggone tramp," Bates squeaked. "I'll calaboose you. You ain't got no means of support—"

"Hell he ain't," Duane jeered. "I'm movin' back out on my ol' place. He's my hand."

"You—you're what?" Lud Bates wailed. "Oh, huddem it—'sif I ain't worrit enough right now. An' him—he ain't no hand."

"That's for me to say," Duane returned.

"An' besides, your old place—why, it's gone back to the Public Domain again. You let it slide," Bates wheezed.

"You think so? You just look 'er up with the Department of Interior, you figger that."

"But—" Bates turned little eyes toward Holabird. It was enough for Duane, who warned: "If anybody's usin' my land, they got damn short shift to move on off."

Holabird opened his puffed lips, shut them, turned and limped away. He went toward a team of matched grays and a glistening buckboard in the line. Duane grinned thinly at Lud Bates. To Dixon, he said, " 'Lo, Clay. Like to really say hello to you, after while." He spoke to the others—noticing how careworn, how aged these old-timers had become during these three years he, Duane, had been gone.

"Come on," he said to the little man, and put his feet to the steps of the Eagle House. That one hesitated, studied Duane warily, came weakly after him.

At the doorway, Duane paused. "Maureen," he gulped. "You get prettier ever' day. An' I want to explain why I never wrote no oftener than I did. It's hard for me to say on paper how I feel—"

"I'm sorry I can't say I'm glad to see you, Shasta," she mumbled. "You were so wild. You promised to go away, grow up, and— Oh, you'll never change! Here five minutes, and you antagonize Holabird and Lud Bates." She stepped past him.

Duane's eyes narrowed. "I'll do more than just antagonize 'em, bigod!" he promised himself. "Wild? Hell, I was playin' three years ago. This time I'm makin' a full time job of it."

CHAPTER II

Straight-Ironed Heel!

THEY were the only two left in the diningroom. Duane motioned to the other to sit down and pile into the grub put on the long table, family style. He tried not to notice the famished trembling of the man, nor the way he fought himself to keep

from diving in and wolfing down the chuck.

Duane turned his mind to Maureen Dixon. So she was locking him out of her corral because it didn't seem he had changed any from the wild, fighting, far-riding puncher of a few years ago; a waddy who had his own little place, worked all over the range and figured he loved her. And she was outraged because he had "Antagonized Holabird!"

Duane shrugged. He never figured to squawk, or play at having a busted heart or gizzard, or whatever. And, anyhow, he had other things besides a girl to think about.

"Fellow," the little man broke in on his thoughts, "I don't understand anybody getting into trouble over me. That man you called Holabird: I've seen some damned bad ones, killers, all kinds. He's a mixture of most of them."

"Forget 'er," Duane said. "I want company on my place, an' you likely can use a rest. Anyhow, I wasn't standin' for Holabird slammin' you. I never liked him none, noway. As for Lud Bates—he's just a fat fool toadyin' to the big ones. I reckon Holabird has got a lot bigger than he was when I left these parts."

"Uh, Shasta Duane's my brand."

"Mine's Giffy. Bill Giffy. I never thought I'd meet a man like you, Duane. No need to tell you I ain't a sick man." He studied Duane intently. "But I will tell you, I got this way doing time."

"There's more men out that belong in—" Duane began.

"No. I want to tell you," Bill Giffy cut in. "Once I was an expert for a safe and vault manufacturing company, Duane. I— Well, I went crazy, I guess. I used what I knew to open a safe in an express office. A couple of longriders were with me. They talked me in to it—which is no excuse, of course. And they got off with most of the money and fixed it so I'd get caught. One of them was later killed, I heard. The other one, I don't know. I did five years on a twelve-year sentence, and I'm on parole."

"Will you eat an' stop jawin'?" Duane demanded. "Look at me. Hell, Giffy, I've taught mules to suck eggs. I've pushed li'l ducks in the water. Yessir. An' before I'm done, I just might kill a skunk or two."

Bill Giffy grinned, then sobered. "I won't forget this, Duane. I just drifted here for my health, and that Holabird just took a dislike to me. About the skunk killing: You may have to, you stick around these parts."

DUANE tossed silver down when they were done, and led the way out. There was no sign of Holabird or the Dixons. But, while Duane was shifting his pack to make riding space for Bill Giffy, old Asia Yale came up to him.

"Damn glad to meet you again, Shasta," he said, offering a paw. "It done me good to see you dough-pop Holabird, though I wouldn't make that too loud. Holabird, Shasta, has got damn big the last couple of years. An' the rest of us is singin' low."

"How's that?"

Asia Yale shook his head. "Rustlers, one thing. You know how much chance a man's got, once his stuff is drove up in the Broodin' Mountains. Me, Clay Dixon, some others, we still graze on Public Domain. Around Blind Park an' Dark Meadows, Shasta. So does Holabird graze there. An' a lot of our grazin' permits expires pretty quick."

"So?"

Yale spat, cursed. "So, when time comes to renew them permits, we're in for it. This year, I hear, man leases so many acres accordin' to how many head he's got. An' that'll mean this Holabird will grab up most the free range for the next few years."

"Why don't you outfits pool an'—" Duane began.

"Yeah? Duane, times has been tough. Right now, Holabird has lent Clay Dixon a lot of money, an' is yellin' that, with rustlers hittin' him hard, too, he's got to have 'er back. Clay aims to make a off-season gatherment an' shipment. Next to Holabird, he is the biggest rancher. With his herd cut down, what weight could we throw?"

Duane nodded soberly. "Reckon the Forest Rangers can't do much," he mused.

"Reckon not. What we need is somebody to run them rustlers plumb outten the mountains, an' tell Holabird which is what. We don't dare, though, step on his hoofs too hard. Seems like you—"

"Sure. I know. I ain't got much to lose, an' I'm wild, nohow."

"That ain't it. I always liked you," Yale protested. "Just seems, seein' you've mixed with him, he's runnin' cattle on your land, an' usin' your water *an'* settin' up with Maureen."

"I hear," Duane said, passing over all that, "the Government is puttin' what they call Federal Range Riders in some states. They ain't like Forest Rangers. All they do is look out for rustlin', trouble an' such on Public lands. Why don't you write an' ask—"

"Hell!" Yale spat. "They'd send some snoopin' ol' fool range policeman in here an' the bunches that hole up in the Broodin's would have him dead before he could get set. Like as not, we'd have to wait ten months to get a answer to the letter."

"Well, I ain't waitin' on nothin'," Duane clipped. "I'm ridin' out to my ol' place. An' Mister Holabird, by havin' his beef run plumb away, is goin' to know how the river runs."

YALE watched him ride away, leading the packhorse with Bill Giffy, scared but game, clinging to the pack. The old man shook his head. "Be better if Shasta was out of here. He'll stir up a mess of hell, then drift on to let the rest of us receipt for it."

Old Yale's face hardened then. "We don't know much of what's he's been doin' while he was gone," he grumbled. "It might be one damn good idea to keep a eye on him." Worry had not helped Yale to keep straight thoughts; neither had encroaching age. He hurried to hunt out McIvry and Long and warn them to be on their guard.

It was late in the afternoon when Shasta Duane crossed a brawling, snow-fed stream and came into a clearing in a copse of tall yellow pines that whispered incessantly. The door of the cabin, constructed of fourteen-inch logs, was closed. The place seemed in a good state of repair, he thought, studying the shakes on the roof, the small pole corral out back.

He swung down. Bill Giffy slid off his horse and clung for a minute to the pack. His spell passed, Duane waved a hand toward the distant, capped peaks of the Brooding Mountains.

"There they are, Giffy. Hell that runs over into Idaho. This rise we're on, leads to what's known as Dark Meadows; beyond is Blind Park. The Meadows is where the cattlemen graze their stuff in summer. Leased, Public lands. Off to the west is Clay Dixon's home spread. East an' North is Holabird's Split 07. The others are scattered around."

Giffy's sunken eyes expressed the awe he felt. His gaze went beyond the timber to the grassed, rising benches. "You said this Holabird's brand was Split 07? You mean—"

"Yeah," Duane said a little wickedly. "Like on them steers out there —on my spread. Somethin' tells me, too, Mister Holabird's been usin' my place for a line camp. Let's have a look."

Inside, Duane was proven right. Canned goods were stacked on the shelves; blankets were folded on the two bunks.

"The grub goes to us, Giffy. Sort of rent on my place. You see, I lacked a li'l on havin' this place proved on when I left. But she's mine, anyhow— Never mind how. So—"

He grabbed up the blankets and started for the door. Something slipped out of the folds of one of them and clattered to the floor. Duane kept on, but stopped when Giffy pointed to the fallen article and asked, "What's that?"

Duane looked down. He pitched the bedding outside, stooped and stood holding a short length of iron in his hands.

"That, Giffy, is somethin' which invites a gent to get in trouble lots of ways. To get caught with it ain't right; an' to use it, Giffy, means you're doin' wrong by somebody's steers an' cows an' calfs. This here now, is known as a runnin' iron."

"An' this," somebody snarled just outside the door, "is a shootin' iron. Both of you, claw for the roof, or it'll put lead brands on you!"

DUANE stood with his left side toward the door. His head snapped around and his attention centered on the man outside. He was a thin-faced, long-armed apparition with a beaked nose above a scraggly mustache, and bore all the earmarks of a brush-runner.

"What the hell?" Duane demanded. "Did Ranse Holabird send you here? If so, you're a damned fool. This's my property."

"No Holabird sent me," the other growled. His expression had changed at mention of Holabird. Now it was wary, crafty. "Me, an' a few of my friends, we use this here place once in a while. As a sort of stopover when we're here on business. An' it's yours, huh? Well—now."

He studied Duane closely, flicked an idle glance at Giffy. "So you're Shasta Duane, eh? Well, Duane my name is Snaith. Fen, by the first name. It riled me to see what few doofunnies we'd left here bein' pitched out. Say it was a mistake, eh?"

"It was," Duane agreed, his meaning double.

Fen Snaith holstered his gun and turned his head. "A'ri', Yakima. I figger this's a friend. Come on in."

Duane saw a man ride out of the timber, rifle across his lap. He was heavy, with glistening black hair showing under a sloppy hat; his skin was of a color that suggested a run of Indian blood in his veins. As he dismounted, Snaith explained: "That's Yakima Coose. He's a—sort of big one in certain parts of these man's hills.

"Yakima, this is Shasta Duane. Says he still owns this place. This other'n is—"

Yakima's beady, hard eyes were on Bill Giffy. He bent forward, frowned, slowly shook his head. Bill Giffy had gone rigid at sight of Yakima. Now he had himself in hand. Two spots shown brightly on Giffy's cheekbones. That was all.

"Giffy's my name," he said.

Yakima shrugged. "For a second, you reminded me of a feller I knowed oncet. Only you're some older, an' not so big."

"Duane found a li'l trinket of ours," Snaith put in.

Yakima nodded at the running iron Duane still held. "But, hell," he chuckled, "what of it? Ain't he a hell-raiser an' all? I reckon us an' Duane is goin' to get along. A man who's got a lot of folks again him— uh, Duane, how you figger makin' a livin' here?"

"Hard work an' me never got along," Duane answered.

"Then, maybe we can get together. You see, this place is right

handy to, uh, beef. You ownin' it, bein' around, would make it better."

"Hell, no!" Duane jeered. "Why should I pull out your chestnuts when I got a fire of my own? Nope. You work your side the fence, an' I'll stick on mine. An', seein' the sociabilities is over, it's your move."

Snaith opened his trap to loose a hot retort. A look from Yakima shut him up.

"Well, I don't know," Yakima drawled. "Around here, we all work together. You give 'er a li'l thought. We'll see you later on."

When the two had ridden off, Bill Giffy was taken with a fit of trembling. "I—I wish I'd had a gun, Duane," he snarled. "I'd blown that Yakima into hell. He's one of the longriders that was with me that time; the one that's left. It was him who got me caught, and got most of the money. He's a killer, a safe blower, and hell knows what else."

Snaith was a boding evil for Duane in that tense room.

"Also," Duane added, "a bell mare for somebody else's trouble. In the first place, Giffy, this cabin is too much in the middle of things to be used as a hideout. Second, no bunch of rustlers—as he as plain as said they was—would stay here while they was workin' a bunch to drive into the higher mountains.

"An' if they did, the place wouldn't be so well stocked up. Nope. Those bush runners might've stayed here—but it was under cover of other men. What men? Well, Holabird's cattle are runnin' all around, an' Holabird, I bet, had plenty of line riders here.

"An' one thing more: them two knew about my trouble in town. They come right out after us from there, then. Who sent them? An' why do they want us, or me, in with them?"

"It's too deep for me," Giffy said. "But, whatever it is, I hope something happens to Yakima Coose." And he looked like he meant it.

"I got an' idea," Duane answered, "it will."

CHAPTER III
Blowoff!

THE next day, another, and the morning of the third day passed, and there was no sign of Holabird's riders. Split 07 cattle still wandered over Duane's place; and for every head of Clay Dixon's CD up on leased range, there were four head of Holabird's.

That third morning, Duane buckled on his gun, examined the weapon, spun the cylinder, holstered it. "You stick here, Giffy. Me, I'm callin' on Holabird. One man ain't got no chance chousin' all them cattle off. Holabird's goin' to do that chore hisself."

"I wish there was something I could do. Damned if I don't feel like what I am—a beggar," Giffy complained.

Duane touched him lightly on the back. "Forget that. You're company, an' the time'll come when you'll be healthy an' can be a hand. We're goin' into the cow business, Giffy—"

"No. Not—"

"Honest cow business," Duane chuckled.

He reached Split 07 some time later, noted how the place had been built up these past three years. What was once a collection of log shacks, was now a big house, bunkhouse and cookhouse. The barns were big, the corrals the same.

Duane heard the ring of an anvil and rode over to the blacksmith shop and gave a hail. A bewhiskered oldster stuck his head out and eyed him without interest.

"Would Holabird be around?" Duane inquired.

"Naw. He ain't never hardly around. Somebody said there was some sort of somethin' goin' on in town. Likely he'll be there." The old man returned to his work.

Duane cut back across the range and brought up at Dixon's place. He hailed a puncher walking toward the saddle barn—a man he knew.

"Howdy, Ed," he greeted, reining up.

"Duane, you ol' hoss-thief! Plenty long time no see. Who? Nope. Clay an' Miss Maureen drove off to Aerie. That huddem Holabird come by. All went in together. Somethin' about the ol' man an' the other outfits poolin' an' gettin' a loan from somebody by doin' that. If she works, we won't have to sell stock we sure as hell does need."

He dragged out makings, building talk as he did. "I hear you're goin' into the wild business, Duane," Ed said too easily.

"Yeah? Like how?"

"Oh, like hookin' up with them as uses the mountains for a home an' hideout."

"Does Clay say that?"

"Him? Hell, no! A few old fogies, what don't really mean nothin', got the idea. An' that Holabird said it might be right. Miss Maureen, she jumped their humps good an' plenty. It's the first time she fired out at Holabird since he lent Clay all that money an' then started hangin' around Miss Maureen."

Duane nodded, grinned, thanked the other and rode away.

HE REACHED Aerie along about mid-afternoon. Clay Dixon and Asia Yale stood before Aerie's one drink emporium; Maureen paused on the porch of the Merchantile Store and raised a hand in a salute.

Grinning, Duane pulled over and got down. Hat in hand, he came up to her.

"You're a poor neighbor," she said, lowering her gaze.

"I was afraid to come over," he told her. "Seein' as how you think I'm so wild, an' all."

"Shasta, I'm sorry about that. Perhaps you did right. Only, I was so in hopes you had calmed down. Shasta, I want you to stay, this time. Ah, don't you understand?"

"How about this Holabird?"

"Him!" She moved restlessly. "One has to be nice when one can't be choosers. But now," she brightened, "that's over. Dad and the rest have finally formed a pool. A bank in Crest City is lending them money, and Dad won't have to strip his range. That will mean he can hold even more Public Domain than before—instead of losing out."

Duane swung around when he heard Sheriff Lud Bates yelling at him from across the street. Clay Dixon, Yale, McIvar stood with the sheriff. Ranse Holabird had just left the group and gone into the saloon.

A foreboding sense of impending trouble tickled Duane's spine as he left Maureen and strode over to join those men.

THE fat officer motioned toward the squat building that housed his office, the jail, courtroom, and a couple other county offices.

"Come 'long, Duane," he puffed. "I want a little talk with you."

"This is silly," Clay Dixon growled a little sheepishly.

"Ain't silly. Besides, I told this hell-raiser to stay out of town."

"I'll take your town apart, an' you with it," Duane jeered, turning into Bates' dusty, littered office. He perched on a corner of Bates' scarred desk. Bates swore and mopped his face.

"Shasta," Clay Dixon said. "this ain't my idea. You see, we're pooling, and getting a loan. Thing is, now, we got to stick whoever it is running off so much beef."

"Uh-huh."

"And we're starting," Bates grunted, "by advising you to be scarce. We know all about things. Holabird told me."

"Told you what?"

"How he had two of his men come to your place and pretend they was from a wild bunch in the mountains. Them men will swear you told them you didn't need help with a running iron, but that you'd think things over and see them some more. And another thing: You was telling that damn tramp you picked up, all about how to use a running iron! That is, if you did pick him up, and he wasn't planted here ahead of time to look over things."

Duane had one hell of a time, keeping a smile on his face. He looked at Bates, at the others, who in turn regarded him intently. He started to explain, then closed his mouth. No, he had to keep the wildness up and in sight. And explaining, he figured, would do no good.

So, Holabird had, as he'd figured, sent Snaith and Yakima. Having failed to get him to agree to the rustle, they'd cross him, or kill him and claim they caught him red-handed.

Duane slid off the desk.

"Maybe somebody'll be damn sorry about this," he grunted as he started out.

"Don't you start no trouble!" Bates squeaked.

"Don't get your lard belly in the way if I start to finish 'er," Duane warned.

"I'll jug you, so help me!" Bates warned.

"This is crazy," Clay Dixon put in. "Shasta, you can explain, and I know it."

"Ain't nothin' to explain—yet," Duane returned.

HE strode out and his spurs made long, rattlesnakish sounds as he roweled them down the walk. He plunged through the saloon doors and went straight back along the bar to the far end, where Holabird, his face covered with bruises and plaster, was drinking with Fen Snaith and Yakima Coose.

The three regarded him easily, keeping their hands atop the bar. Duane fought down an urge to drag his gun and salivate the trio.

"Whatever your game is—an' I've caused you to change 'er once already — it won't stick," he warned. "You, Holabird, get your damn steers off my range. By tomorrow. If—"

"What?" Holabird snapped.

Duane tapped his holster. "You'll sort of pay," he said, and turned away.

That move wasn't smart, and he found it out. He started to wheel back when boots scuffled back of him. A fist caught him in the back of the neck, seeming to paralyze him all over. Another bunch of knuckles landed against the side of his head and brought blood rushing from his ears.

He rolled, and could hear Holabird shouting, "Don't you go for that gun, now. Don't you!"

He did go for his gun. Dragged it and, still on one knee, his body swaying unsteadily, covered them. Not a son of the three made a motion toward his gun.

That was the picture when Lud Bates, Clay Dixon and some others came piling in.

"I told you, I told you!" Bates shrilled. "Drop that gun."

Duane thrust the pistol back into the leather, shaking his ringing head. He reached for the scarf around his neck to wipe away a trickle of blood from his battered ear. It wasn't there; torn off in that sudden flurry of fists, most likely.

He forgot about it when Bates prodded him with a gun.

"March to the calaboose," Bates commanded. "Bigod, you done raised all the hell you're going to. When you was here three years ago, you was wild. But now, you're just a plain bad one. March, I said."

"Wait." Clay Dixon interposed. "What was this all about?"

"You taking up for him, Dixon?" Holabird demanded.

"Maybe. Don't forget, Holabird, by sundown, the money I need to pay off to you will be in the express office of the stage company. I won't be in your debt any more."

Holabird shrugged. "That's not the idea," he explained. "This Duane came in here and threatened us. The barkeep, those two punchers over there, heard him. He pawed for his holster, tried to trick us into drawing. We grabbed him.

"But, if you say so, then it's all right. Bates, we won't make a charge against him. But," he spoke to Dixon again, "I think it's a mistake."

So did Bates, and he said so. Holabird was a big man, so Bates wanted to shine for him. Besides, Duane had jeered Bates, and hadn't shown what the fat officer thought was a proper respect for him.

"Thanks, Clay," Duane said as he started to move away, unable to savvy the quick turns Holabird made. Why hadn't they drawn? Why were they playing the injured innocents? Duane cussed the too-deep way Holabird ran.

"Don't thank me," Clay Dixon said in a low voice, for Duane alone. "I'm thinking of Maureen, Duane. I wish you hadn't come back, now. Though I don't like Holabird so much, he'd been better, maybe, for her than you. Look like you'll never settle down."

As he went out, Duane was wondering. Wondering if he were wrong about Holabird. Was the man causing all this trouble for Duane, just to make him look bad in Maureen's eyes?

This last blowoff, Duane knew, wasn't going to help a bit.

There was nothing he could do right now, but wait for tomorrow, and see if Holabird started moving his beef off Duane's place.

CHAPTER IV

Loco Law!

GIFFY had supper ready when he reached home. He looked at Duane's puffed ear, and Duane explained briefly.

"Why, outside the fact Miss Dixon likes you, and that you are back holding down this place, would Holabird cause trouble for you?" Giffy wondered.

"He's coverin' hisself on somethin', Giffy," Duane decided. "This rustlin', now. A man could hold beef in the higher reaches of Broodin' Mountains, an' a army couldn't find them. The brands could be blotted, then the stuff run into Idaho, or on into Montana an' sold there. Yeah, bigod! An' Dixon's CD could be changed into a Split 07 pretty easy, too.

"Pretty soon, outside of makin' hiyuh money, Holabird would damn near have all the range, an' then step on in an' take over the owned outfits hereabouts."

He sat down at the table. "No use ridin' around. Wouldn't find out a thing. I just got to wait on this end of the loop an' hope I don't get tied."

He went to sleep that night wondering what course to pursue if Hola-

bird should fail to send men to move his stuff. He had a right to charge Holabird grazing fees. Charging and collecting, though, were two different things. He had the right to shoot Split 07 beef. Maybe that was what Holabird wanted: excuse for an open fight.

It lacked an hour before dawn when he awakened. Horses snorted, riding gear creaked and jingled, and men's voices droned outside.

"Giffy?"

"Yeah, I'm awake," Giffy whispered, voice tense. "I—"

"In there," someone yelled. "Have up a light, damn you, and come out with your paws to the clouds."

"Like hell!" Duane roared back. He grabbed up his gun and sent a shot through a window, the slug going above the heads of the men who scattered.

In those few moments, he piled into his clothes. He'd wondered what Holabird's next move would be. He figured he had the answer now.

"Name of the Law, come out of there!"

Lud Bates' bawled command rooted Duane in his tracks. What the hell was this? He knew Bates for the swelled, stuffed fool he was—but never figured him to turn brawnk.

"What the hell's all this?" Duane called back.

"You took a shot at the law," Bates began.

"You fool, you never yelled who you was. You expect me to be leaded out—"

"Expect a damn killer and thief to do most anything. But we got you dead to rights. You and that tramp partner come out."

Duane heard Giffy moan, and knew the reason why. If Giffy ran afoul of the law, his parole from prison would be broken and they'd take him back again.

"Smooth out your bunk, get by that rear window, an' when they come in, try to make 'er out," Duane insisted.

"Nothing doing," Giffy answered, and his tone denied further argument. More than ever, Duane warmed toward the other.

"Bates, who's with you?" he called.

"I am, Duane," he heard Asia Yale call. "An' Holabird an' some of his men. You don't deserve it, but we'll see you get fair shakes."

"What the hell is it, I wonder?" Duane grunted. He touched a match to the lamp's wick, and when the yellow light filled the room, he walked to the door, called, "All right," and opened up.

There was movement out there as they all headed for the door, Lud Bates in the lead.

"You're under arrest," Bates croaked, his pistol cocked as he covered Duane, "for killing Bud Mason, the guard on at the stage express office tonight. And for blowing open the safe and taking the money the bank in Crest City sent up for Clay Dixon and the rest."

"That's a damn lie!" Duane snarled. "I been here—"

"Then how'd this get there? Walk by itself? How did we come to find Bud Mason, his head all bashed in, holding this in his hand?"

Lud Bates shook a scarf in Duane's face. The scarf he had missed after the fight in the saloon. He turned toward Holabird. There was goading mockery in Holabird's low-lidded look. Fen Snaith and Yakima Coose sided their boss.

A sudden knowledge thrust through Duane, and he closed his mouth on a sudden rush of words.

"I lost that scarf," he said, reaching for his hat. "Anyhow, you don't figger Giffy was in on this, so—"

"He goes with you until he can prove himself," Bates snorted. "Get going. When we get you locked up, we can come back and search this place and see if you cached the money here."

THE sun was rising when Bates and his posse came into Aerie with their prisoners in the middle of the group. They were marched through Bates' office and into one of the three cells in the rear. Duane sat down on the bunk. Giffy stood and gripped the bars of the cell, cold sweat pouring off him, as the sound of Bates' heavy footsteps died away.

"Easy, partner," Duane cautioned. "We ain't done yet."

"No? Hell, Duane, whoever done this could plant money in your place. They could—" He stopped, eyeing Duane hopefully.

"You mean—mean there's no danger? You wouldn't be one of these secret range officers? You—"

"Nary a bit," Duane told him. "But we're not done yet. Listen. They said the safe at the stage office was blowed. How many men in these parts—"

"Yakima Coose, bigod!" Giffy ground out.

"Uh-huh. An' I lost that scarf in a fight with Holabird, Coose, an' Snaith. You see, or I do, now, why Holabird started a rumpus, yet didn't want me to go to jail. He failed to hook me by sendin' Yakima an' Snaith at me. He knows, now, I know about the runnin' iron, an' that his men had used my shack."

Giffy nodded. Duane continued:

"Also, Dixon got a jump on him by poolin' an' gettin' outside money. That would block Holabird's plan to gobble more range an' be big coon in these parts. So Holabird stops that. I reckon Dixon an' the others signed for that shipment last night, an' left it in that safe. Which makes it their loss—not the stage company or the bank."

"How can we prove all this?" Giffy demanded. "Migod, Duane, all we got is our word—"

"Which ain't worth a plugged peso against the evidence we got against us. Or me, anyhow. Thing is, now, we got to try an' get you out of here."

A door opened, footsteps came toward their cell. Clay Dixon, with Maureen behind him, stopped. Dixon tried twice before he could speak.

"Shasta, you're the last man in the world I'd believe this of. You said yesterday, in Bates' office, that somebody would be damn sorry over prodding you. I didn't figure you'd land on us, break us, play us into Holabird's hands. Especially when you consider Maureen and—"

Maureen pushed past her father and leaned against the bars. "Duane!" she cried. "You couldn't have. I know it, and I'll believe in you, no matter what they say."

He gripped her hands through the bars. "I'll never forget this," he said huskily. He looked past her at Clay Dixon. "I had nothin' to do with it," he said. "An' Giffy, here, is a sick man. They at least ought to let him haul out of here."

Dixon said, "There's nothing I can do, Duane. And the evidence, man. It's all against you. I wish I could believe. But I don't feel like Maureen."

He turned away, and it struck Duane that Dixon had not directly accused him; hadn't asked him to reveal the hiding place of the money. Down deep, Clay Dixon wasn't sure Duane was guilty. That helped his feelings, too.

"Maureen," he whispered hastily, "do what you can to get Giffy out of here. Won't be no use tryin' to get me loose."

"I don't understand," she answered. "But I'll do all I can."

Bates called to her from his office that time was up. Duane turned back, to find Giffy studying him in a puzzled way.

"I can't understand why you're trying to get me loose," he began.

"Giffy, we got to prove somethin' on Holabird. Now, if Holabird is the one back of all the rustlin', he's bound to have figgers, or notes, or some-

thin' that shows how much he takes in, or pays off. If he was back of this robbery, he's got the money. We know he was, because Coose is his man, an' Coose must've blowed that safe.

"Where'd Holabird keep things like that, you wonder?"

"Locked up, of course," Giffy answered.

"Yeah. An' I'd stake plenty he'll have a safe in his house, an' the stuff'll be in there."

His look at Giffy was pointed and meaning.

"I—get it," Giffy said hoarsely.

"If you're caught, it'll likely mean killin'; an' if it don't work, it might mean back to prison," Duane warned.

"I know. But, hell, man, you think I'll stop at that? You stood up for me, took me in— No. Just get me out of here."

Light steps sounded up the way. They fell silent. Duane started when Maureen, finger to her lips, fright widening her eyes, came up.

"The judge won't be here until tomorrow," she whispered. "So you won't get a hearing until then."

Duane groaned. By tomorrow, no telling what else Holabird would hatch up. Opinion against him would be sealed more solidly. And now the chance of getting Giffy out was gone!

"I saw Bates go into the saloon," Maureen hurried on. "I slipped in here. Duane, if you're innocent, you'll face this. If you're not, I hope you'll understand what this will mean to me. Here. I found this in a bottom drawer of Bates' desk. An extra key that matches the one hanging on the wall in his office."

She thrust a heavy key through the bars into his hands, and before he could speak, turned and, a sob shaking her shoulders, hurried out of the jail.

Duane looked at the key which he held in his hand. It meant hope and freedom to him. And if he ever thought that Maureen cared for him, he knew it now.

CHAPTER V

Trespassing!

THE old man, who acted as jailer in the evening, came back to the cells and looked in. Giffy and Duane breathed heavily, simulating sleep. The jailer tramped out. They heard him locking up in front as he started home for the night.

"Man'd be a cooked dogie, this place caught on fire," Duane growled, throwing back his blanket and reaching under his bunk for his boots.

They eased into the front office. Duane found guns confiscated from drunk cowpunchers, selected one to his liking and shoved it and a handful of shells into his pockets. He fastened the nightlatch on the front door and led the way out into the night's silence. A few minutes later, he and Giffy led horses out of the stable in the rear of the jail, mounted, rode away.

Stifling her sobs, Maureen Dixon came out of the darkness across the street and hurried toward the Eagle House, where she was staying.

She couldn't give an alarm. She had helped Duane get away. It seemed the heart was torn completely out of her.

And as Duane and Giffy rode into the dark, Duane's thoughts were of Maureen.

"We don't dare slip!" he told Giffy. "One wrong move an' we're sunk."

"You aren't telling me a thing I don't know," Giffy replied.

They left their mounts on the outskirts of the buildings at Split 07 and went forward on foot. Silence of the grave overhung the place. By the porch steps, Giffy took off his shoes, and Duane removed his boots. Giffy tied his laces together, swung the shoes around his neck. Duane toted his boots in one hand, his borrowed gun in the other.

Cautiously, Giffy tried the front door, pushed it open, stiffening when a hinge gave off a mournful creak. They froze, let hour-long seconds pass, moved on.

Somewhere in the back of the house, a man snored raspingly. Giffy pushed open a door to his right and they stood there listening. Stale odor of whiskey and cigar smoke clung in the room. They moved on in. After what seemed ages, Giffy hissed, "We hit it. Here's a safe. Old as time, and easy to open. Wait."

A metallic clinking broke suddenly on Duane's ears. He eared back the hammer of the gun he held. "Giffy— somebody cocked a gun!"

"Quiet," Giffy panted. "That was tumblers falling. I open a box like this relic by the sound of them. It's not hard— There!"

Duane crossed, knelt beside him. "Here's bundles, wrapped in paper. Might be money. Here's check stubs and stuff . . ."

They filled the front of their shirts, their pockets, with the contents of the safe. Giffy closed the door and twirled the dial. They tiptoed back toward the door. Giffy bumped Duane when the latter came up short.

The sounds of a snoring man no longer came to Duane's ears. He heard a soft sound in the hall and as he peek around the doorframe, his darkness-accustomed eyes made out a dark blot moving in the blackness. Duane leaned back as the man stopped in the hall, listening intently.

"Swore I heard somethin'," he muttered under his breath. "I'll just have me a look an'—"

The barrel of Duane's gun made a dull sound on the man's head, and Duane caught him as he sagged. "Come on," he hissed at Giffy. "We can't leave him here to give us away. If the stuff we got ain't what we figger, we don't want no alarm let go."

He shouldered the dead weight of the man and staggered out. In sock feet, they made it to their horses and Duane laid the man down, pulled on his boots, shielded a match and flicked a quick light over the face of the unconscious man.

"Yakima Coose, bigod!" he blurted.

"What'll we do with him?" Giffy choked.

"Mister Yakima goes with us, even if he ain't got on nothin' but his pants an' underwear," Duane decided. He hoisted Yakima into the saddle and climbed up behind him.

When he'd pigged his wrists and stuffed a handkerchief in Yakima's mouth, they headed back to town.

YAKIMA was conscious when Duane lugged him into the jail, put him in the last cell and locked the door. He chewed at the gagging handkerchief and his eyes rolled as he watched Duane go out.

"I put the horses back," Giffy said.

Duane nodded. Gray light was streaking the sky in the east and filtering into the room. They opened their shirts and dumped the stuff from Holabird's safe on the top of Bates' desk. Duane broke the heavy paper on one of the packages.

"Money, an' plenty!" he exclaimed.

"But no proof where it come from," Giffy reminded.

Duane unsnapped a band from a bundle of papers, crowded a window for what light there was and began to read. . . .

"It's there, Giffy," he said finally, his voice flat. Receipts from Idaho an' Montana for big beef deliveries; check stubs on a Montana bank, showin' deposits. There's enough stuff there— Hold 'er."

He held a telegram to the light. "Sent to Holabird at Crest City, two days ago," he mumbled. "Hell, listen to this.

" 'Replying your wire. Duane land clear and proven despite fact did not reside full time. Time spent as rider investigator Federal ranges allowed.'

"It's from a land office an' records bureau," Duane explained. "Holabird wired to see if I did own the place. An' he thinks, I reckon, I'm workin' for the Government. Which same I ain't no more. I made my li'l pile an' worked the wild streak out of me, chousin' trouble on Government lands. I come back here to settle. Well, bigod, I will!"

He turned and went back to Yakima's cell, stepped in and jerked the gag out of his mouth. "What you got to say, fella?" he demanded. "Don't lie, damn you. We got all the stuff out of Holabird's safe. Includin' the telegram about my bein' a Federal Range rider."

"I told Holabird not to fool. To just shoot you," Yakima snarled. "All right, I'm taking the easiest way. I'll tell you: Holabird an' Snaith done all the dirt. I did have a hand in runnin' some of Dixon's cattle into the mountains. We branded over. Some with Holabird's Split 07; some with other brands."

"You blowed that safe last night, too."

"I didn't! I—"

"That's a damn lie, Yakima." Giffy stepped around Duane. "Look good this time, Yakima. Remember me now? You didn't want to chance blowing a safe one time, and euchred me into being a sucker. Remember?"

"It's—Smith," Yakima groaned.

"Real name, Giffy. All right. Now, about last night?"

"I blew that safe, all right," Yakima croaked. "Snaith was in there with me. Holabird was on the lookout. Guess he didn't trust us to tote the money out. It was Holabird got Mason."

"You'll swear to that?" Duane demanded.

"What the hell else can I do?" Yakima sagged back.

They left him there. Went out, found Lud Bates' private bottle in the desk and had a drink. They were sitting there when Bates lumbered up on the tail of the rising sun. And when Bates opened the door, Duane grinned and motioned with his gun.

The sheriff's eyes almost popped out of his head; he gulped for air as he sideled in and wedged into a chair.

"Now," Duane told him, chuckling, "we'll have a li'l talk."

Bates laid down the last of the papers, arose heavily, went back and had his look at Yakima Coose. He returned to the front office, picked up his bottle and scowled at the lowered contents, and lowered it some more.

"Why in the hell didn't you tell me you was here to work on cattle bein' rustled off Public Domains?" he demanded.

"Because I ain't. That's why. I come back to settle down."

"Then you never had no right to bust out of my jail— Bigod, how did you get out?"

"That," Duane hooted, "is a secret we won't tell."

"And how'd you get this stuff?"

"Somethin' else we forgot about."

"Listen," Bates wailed, "you expect me to grab Holabird and Snaith, but you won't tell me a thing. How do I know this ain't a monkeyshine on me?"

"You go get them two—I reckon they're at the hotel—an' bring them here. Don't tell them a thing," Duane directed.

Sullenly, Bates left them there.

"Thinks he's running things, making a fool of me," he grumbled to himself. "Well, he won't cut it. I'll bring those jaspers in. But I'll do it for myself."

HOLABIRD walked close to Lud Bates' side as they moved down the stairs. Fen Snaith was close on the sheriff's heels. They didn't turn into the diningroom, wherein Clay Dixon and others pecked at food they didn't feel like eating.

"So we're under arrest," Holabird snarled. "You had a suspicion, and Yakima blabbed when you locked him up. That's too bad. For both of you. We'll just fix this, all around. To others, now, it looks like we come friendly with you. It'll look different in a little while. You'll be dead, and those two you got in jail will be dead, and so will Yakima.

"We'll say that Yakima must have been in with those two, and sneaked here to turn them loose. When we three walked in, they jumped us. In the shuffle, all of you get killed."

"Four men?" Bates groaned. "Mi-god, that's wholesale murder!" He stumbled. Holabird prodded him with the gun held underneath his coat.

"Get inside!" he snarled, shoving Bates into the jail office ahead of him.

For a moment, Holabird's eyes were on the pile of money and papers on the desk, then darted around the room, centered on Duane who leaned negligently against the wall.

"It's a trap!" he bawled, raising the gun in his hand and clawing for the mate to it as he leaped back.

Dud Bates flung himself face downward as Holabird's gun roared, filling the room with throbbing sound. The slug hissed above the fat man and buried in the wall.

Holabird still backed, and now he shouldered Fen Snaith and sent him plunging toward Duane. Snaith caught the lead from Duane's gun, twisted, flinging his own weapon across the room. His falling body tripped Duane and sent him stumbling. He caught his balance and swung toward the door.

A bullet smashed the doorframe as Duane plunged out. His own gun roared. Holabird winced, half turned and drove a wild shot back at him, dove toward the narrow alley between store and harness shop.

Duane put on all the drive he could call into his legs. Men were bouncing out onto the porch of the Eagle House. One of them yelled, "Jail-break!" and went for his gun.

In the alley, Holabird spun around, gun raised, the hammer back, his eyes on a heart-level spot at the building's corner.

Around that corner, Duane dropped to his stomach. He booted himself forward, gun ahead of him. The echo of the shot boomed drumlike in the alleyway.

Holabird staggered, pawed at the building, his eyes widening. He tried to speak, but a rush of red fluid choked the words. He went down slowly, fighting against death. But death, as always, won.

Duane crouched there, hearing men yelling back and forth. "Jail-break. . . . Get around him. . . ."

Sweat popped out on his forehead. He couldn't shoot those men, who honestly thought he'd burst jail. Yet he couldn't just hunker here and let them lead him down.

He heard Clay Dixon bawl, "Maureen, come back!"

She didn't seem to hear as she raced down the street and turned into the little alley ahead of the growing mob.

"Shasta," she sobbed when she reached him. "Why didn't you go on? I saw you leave last night and—"

"An' you figgered I was runnin'. But you still come here to help me."

"I can't help it. There's a chance you can get away out back of these buildings. I—"

"Hi! Stop that fuss." Lud Bates' voice, squeaking above the growing din, was a welcome sound to Duane now. "Stop it, I say. Me and Duane have been working together. All this business of him being wild was just put on . . ."

When Duane had shaken the last hand, and the jail was empty, he turned to Lud Bates and chuckled. "I figger you blabbed to Holabird an' he caught you off guard, huh?"

"Aw—it was just my way of getting them here," Bates growled.

"Sure." Duane winked at Giffy. "Now, when Yakima comes to trial, there'll be mention of openin' a safe. Or maybe not. It would be best not to mention it. You understand?"

"Uh—yeah, I do."

"Come on, Giffy," Duane jerked his head toward the door. "They's goin' to be a big blowout tonight, an' we're goin' to howl."

"Now, you look here," Bates cautioned. "Just because—"

Duane looked up the street where Maureen waited before the hotel.

"An' a li'l later, Bates, they'll be a weddin'," he chuckled. "An' that'll be a celebration like you *never* saw before."

He went up the street toward the Eagle House while Giffy, like a reasonable man, stopped off, ostensibly to have a drink, but in reality to let Duane meet that girl alone.

In his office, Lud Bates mopped his perspiring face and swore miserably. "He'll never calm down, damn it," he wailed, and morosely contemplated what misery the future held for him.

A WHIRLWIND!!

A SMASHING!!
BOOK-LENGTH NOVEL
The White-Haired Kid
By
EDGAR L. COOPER

*

Thundering Novelettes

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Fast-action
Short Stories

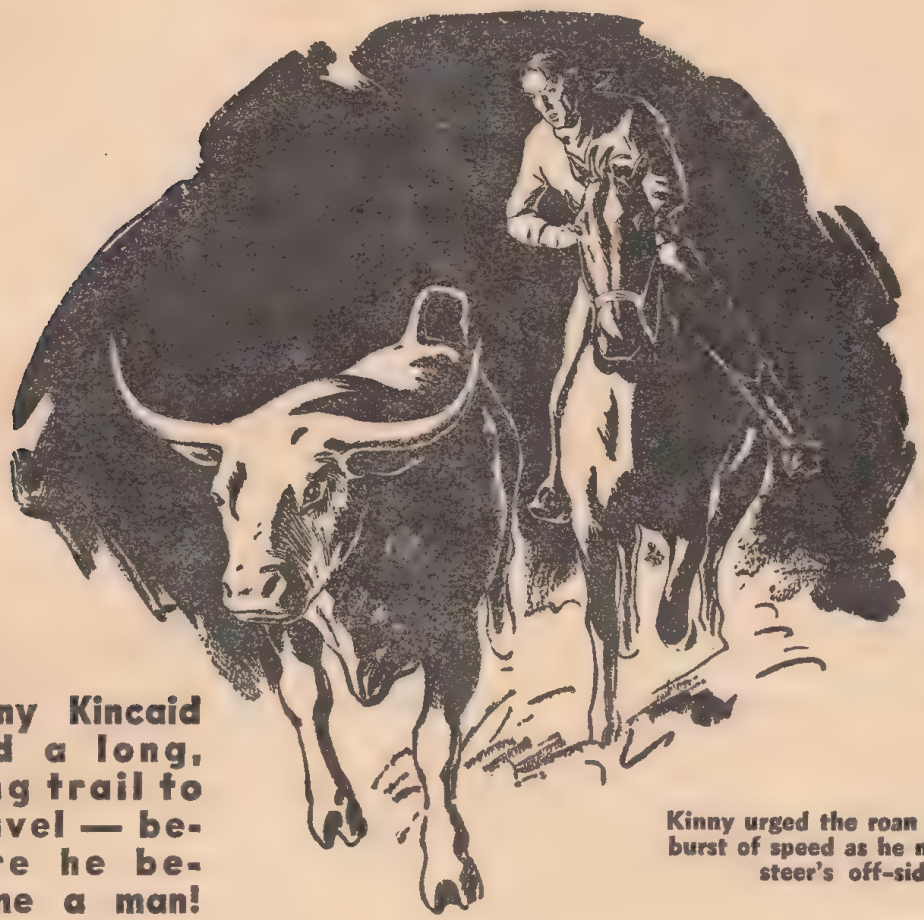
*

Interesting Features
And Humorous Cartoons

COMING SOON IN WEST

UP THE LONG TRAIL

By L. L. FOREMAN



Kinny Kincaid had a long, long trail to travel — before he became a man!

Kinny urged the roan to a final burst of speed as he neared the steer's off-side.

SOMETHING was happening down by the creek where the rolling Tree L outfit had made temporary camp. Men were shouting, and hoofs thudded on the hard-baked earth with solid impacts. Against the drowsing quiet of Sweetwater the sounds were sharp and distinct. But Sweetwater citizens were not aroused by the commotion. The dusty main street, deserted except for a few saddled ponies drooping at the hitch-racks, only reflected the blinding glare of the hot noon sun.

Kinny Kincaid, lean as a hound and grave with the dignity of adventuresome youth, asked in his new, deep voice, "Wonder what's all the racket, Dex?"

Fen Dexter, less grave and dignified by reason of his fifty-odd years, shrugged. "Cow on the prod, reckon." He had other things to worry about.

They stood on the sun-warped platform of Sweetwater's bare little station, with the glittering railroad tracks running straight out of sight, both ways, across the Texas prairie. With them stood the assembled force of the Big Arrow hands—fourteen men in their best Sunday rigs—and a few of Sweetwater's leading citizens. The town, for no special reason, had sprung up a hundred yards behind the station instead of around it, thereby gaining for itself an unearned air of exclusiveness.

The little crowd awaited with mingled interest and some slight trepidation the arrival of the great

John Draker Bayard, eastern owner of the Big Arrow. The interest was enjoyed by the half dozen leading citizens. The trepidation was suffered by the Big Arrow hands, and most of all by Fen Dexter, range boss and manager.

They could still recall, over the span of several years, the last visit of the great J.D. Not a pleasurable memory. J.D. was efficient in a peculiarly disturbing way. He insisted on seeing a profit each year, though the Big Arrow was, as he himself admitted, only a hobby with him. An expensive hobby, this year. The books showed a loss. That was why he was coming down from the east.

"Looka thet critter!" called out a Big Arrow hand. "Fella, thet's high-tailin'! He's—holy smoke, he's head-in' right for town!"

The steer coming over the rise from the creek camp pounded up dust and left it hanging in his trail. He was travelling fast, head and horns lowered, hitting a senseless course for Sweetwater. Behind it, bobbing up into sight, a pair of riders came loping hard after it.

Kinny Kincaid took off his brand-new Stetson and handed it to Dexter. "Hold it for me, Dex," he said hastily as he jumped down from the platform.

He heard Dexter call after him, "What you gonna—hey, son! Train's due soon! J.D.—he'll be expectin' you here to meet him. An' your brother Grant'll be with him an' he'll—"

The rest was lost, because Kinny smacked into his saddle, snatched up the split reins, and dug heel. His red roan registered protest with a snort, reared, and came down running. Kinny headed it for the end of the main street, with the hope of getting there before the rampaging steer.

There was no reasoning in his action, since reason would have told him to tend to his own business. Here he was, all duded up in his Sunday best shirt and pants, the way Grant and J.D. would expect to see him. . . . No time to take out after somebody's runaway critter, at this time of all times. But he had seen a man gored, once—his father. There might be people in the main street. Kids, perhaps. He couldn't see from this angle.

THE steer was an old brockle-face, wild and gaunt like all the critters that came up from the drouth-stricken Plateau country with the rolling poverty herds. Kinny studied the big brute as their routes began to converge. This was a bad old ladino, wise in mischief and ornery mad clear through. And he was fast on his feet. He was going to beat the roan's time to the main street, with the start he'd got.

The two pursuing riders were shouting. Kinny, kicking the roan to its top gait, took a look their way. They were shouting at him. One of them was hauling his mount to a jolting, slithering halt that plowed up dust around him in a cloud. The flickering glint of a gun flashed in his hand. Other riders were stringing up over the rise from the herd camp.

Kinny knew, then, that someone was in the street. Those Tree L riders could see along its length, from where they were. That fellow pulling in was going to take a chance on a shot's bringing the steer down. Long chance, at that range, and even if he, by some fluke, hit the steer, it wouldn't drop him. Very likely it would make him madder.

The gun cracked, its report sounding curiously flat and futile in the heated air. The steer took an extra spurt and plunged on its way into the mouth of the main street. Kinny had time to marvel at the marksmanship before he reached the corner.

He took the corner with his right stirrup almost skimming dust, and

thought for a second that the roan was going into a tumble, but it avoided the deep ruts and kept footing. Kinny felt his saddle slip a little under him, at the strain of the turn, and prayed. He could see the whole of the street now.

Hitched ponies were dancing at the racks and crowding each other. People were appearing at doorways. Halfway down the street, a small figure ran first one way, then another; one of Mex Joe's kids, come out to look at the excitement, and now terrified out of its senses.

A woman ran out of a doorway, screaming, and made for the scuttling child with arms outspread. Mex Joe's wife. With all the kids she had, she was ready to pitch her work-worn life away to save this one. Kinny yelled at her, and swore at himself for not having a gun.

A man jumped out from the Green Bottle saloon, waving his arms. The steer swerved, and its spread of horns missed by inches as the man threw himself back onto the boardwalk, Kinny lifted the roan to a final burst of speed, dropped his reins when he was brushing close to the steer's offside, and left the saddle in a headlong dive.

He hit with a hollow sound against the brute's ribs, and his right arm whipped around the thick, shaggy neck. His fingers found the loose bottom skin, and gripped a tight hold. With his left hand he reached over and grabbed the tip of the long, left horn.

He was clear of the ground, and bumping with every lunge of the mad animal. The earth rushed by under him, and faintly he heard again the mother's shrill scream. He threw all the weight of his lean body onto his braced left arm, forcing the horn over.

For a sickening second he feared he lacked the weight. He had bulldogged steers before, but none anywhere near the size and strength of this one. Then he felt a break in the lunging stride, and the great bulk under him was toppling off balance. He flung his body clear, still holding on with both arms, as he and the steer crashed groundward together.

IT WAS a loud crash. When Kinny got some of his breath back, he raised his head and looked dizzily about him. The steer lay passive and stunned beside him, feet feebly kicking. The wreckage of a new buckboard leaned drunkenly against the front of the general store, the team struggling in tangled harness, and the store window broken. It was, he recognized by the team, the Big Arrow buckboard—the one specially made on J.D.'s order, for his personal use.

"It kinda took guts," drawled somebody, "to dog down a brush-splitter that big. But that's no reason to go bye-bye on a town's main street in them swell duds an' all."

Kinny twisted his neck to look up. The speaker was the Tree L man who had clipped the long shot. Gray-haired, in his middle years, he lounged in his saddle, with the tired carelessness of a man way behind in his rest and sleep. His eyes, faded to a colorless hue, were quietly shrewd, with dry humor and a touch of youth still left in them.

"If you'd light an' give me a hand," began Kinny, "'stead of—"

"Not ness'ry," murmured the gray-head's companion, a lanky weather-whipped rail of a man. "You busted him plumb silly."

The rest of the riders came clattering down the street; hard, leathery men, spare of body and burned dark by the sun, with quiet eyes and quick ways. The south Border country turned out a tough breed of man. Compared to the comfortably-living Big Arrow hands, these hard-bitten trail riders looked seasoned, untamed, salty.

To them, a two-days' camp in this Sweetwater country, with four thousand head of half-wild cattle to keep loose-bunched, was pure comfort. It would sustain them for many a day longer on the drive north, up the long trail through the raw Cimarron country, on past Dodge and the weary trek to Ogallala, and west to Wyoming, where beef markets and free range beckoned.

Fifteen hundred miles of choking dust, bone-aching saddle work, unfamiliar rivers to ford, predatory parasites—human and beast—to fight off. Eighteen hours in saddle, and six hours of rest—barring accidents—per day. They would make Wyoming with perhaps two-thirds of the herd, half the original remuda, and short a man or two.

Kinny got to his feet and brushed dust from his face. He started to brush off his clothes, too, but decided they were no longer worth the trouble. The white silk shirt with black pockets and the fine buckskin pants had not been designed for rough wear.

The grayed man was eyeing him with suddenly intent gaze. "Y'know," he remarked thoughtfully, "you're the spittin' image of an old side-kick o' mine from way back. Old Kinnikin. Y'act like him, too, kinda. Any kin?"

As always, mention of the name brought its mingled pride and sense of loss to Kinny. He nodded, trying to look not too eager. "My father. I'm young Kinny—I mean, I'm Kinny Kincaid. Mom—she's dead too—she was bound to name me Gary. She named Grant. He's my brother—older'n me. But Dad 'lowed I looked so much like him, he just—"

He caught himself up. Here he was running off at the mouth like some durn kid. Fellow had to cut out that kind of stuff when he was a grown man. "Er—what might your name be?" he asked with forced casualness.

"Well — L— be — danged!" The grayed man slid to the ground. He lacked Kinny's height by some three inches, but Kinny felt small beside him. "Old Kinnikin's son! I heard tell, years back, he'd married an' got him a family. Howdy, young Kinnikin! I'm Hob Vogel. I own that poverty-struck trail outfit of a Tree L, out there."

KINNY felt big again, and swift pride brought back all his grave dignity. Young Kinnikin—there was a name to ride under. An honest-to-Sam name that meant something. Kinnikin. His father had tacked that monicker high, and never let it down.

He shook hands with Hob Vogel. "I 'member Dad used to talk 'bout you, Mr. Vogel. Gosh, he used to tell me how you and he—"

"Among all the lies he prob'ly told 'bout me," interrupted Vogel, "I'll bet he never called me 'Mister.' Nor don't you. Folks mostly call me Hob. To my face, anyway. So old Kinnikin passed on, eh? I thought he'd live to ninety. He was tough enough, the old son. How long?"

"Going on six years ago." It was good to find someone who had ridden with his father in the old wild days. Kinny forgot all about the train and the coming of J.D. and Grant. These Sweetwater folks had known old Kinnikin only in his tame years. "He was killed by a steer," he added. "Gored."

Hob Vogel shook his head. "Bad," he muttered, and his hard old face hid such emotion that he felt. "Well, we all come to it, soon'r later."

He raised a glance to his lanky top-hand rider. "Obie, you 'member old Kinnikin, don't you? This is young Kinnikin. Sure favors him, h'm?"

"All ways," murmured Obie, and stretched down a hand. "Hiya, young Kinnikin. Yeah, I knowed your pa. Quite a bit o' man."

Somewhere a train gave an imperi-

ous blast from its whistle. Wheels groaned to a grinding halt on steel tracks, grudging to pause at this little Notown of Nowhere for even so important a passenger as J. D. Bayard. They started up again with disdainful haste, the whistle shrilled its final insult, and the train sped on its way.

Kinny heard, but the significance of the sounds did not enter his consciousness. Hob Vogel was speaking, his casual words carried to Kinny the effect of a king unexpectedly offering knighthood to a subject.

"Care to join my outfit?" was all Vogel said, but the vastness of the compliment was dizzying.

Why, only lords of the saddle went with a trail herd. Men with reputations, who knew all the tricks of saving a horse and extracting its last labored step without ruining it. Men who could work in the saddle all day, and ride herd in their sleep at night, if necessary. Picked old hands, wise and tough and unkillable, who could and would stick to the last mile. Men like these Tree L riders. . . .

Kinny swallowed and said, "Uh—why—"

"There won't be any pay, y'understand," Vogel broke in on him. "Not till we get where we're goin'. An' mebby not then, for awhile. Ain't sure yet where we'll light. Might be we'll have to sell what's left o' the herd after we get up there, if all the free range is taken up. Had to start out on spec."

"Sure," Kinny nodded. "I understand that. Only—"

"Got so dry down our way," pursued Vogel, "a man couldn't spit 'thout raisin' a dust. We're livin' on beef an' coffee, mostly, with a little—Sit on that critter's head, somebody. He's comin' up. Put a rope on him. He's next on the bill o' fare. Tell Jaffy that. Like I was sayin', Kinnikin, we ain't got much family comforts to speak of, but when we get up to Wyomin' we'll mebby still have a middlin' fair spread."

"It—it ain't that," said Kinny. "I'd sure like to go up the long trail with you. You know that. Only—well—"

It was awful hard to explain a thing that everybody knew and took for granted. Vogel was looking at him with a quizzical lift to one frosty eyebrow. Obie's eyes had turned solemn and weighing, somehow. The rest of the riders just sat in their worn saddles and idly watched the neck-roping of the steer, yet they had the air of men with attentive ears.

"Would it," inquired Vogel, "be a gal?"

"Uh-uh." Kinny disclaimed that. "It's just—well—see, J.D. expects me to—to stay on here. J.D.—he's Mr. Bayard. He owns the Big Arrow."

"Heard of him," Vogel admitted. "Easterner, ain't he? Big man, they say. So you're workin' for his play-hobby outfit, eh? Well then, that's dif'rent."

"Yeah, I kind o' work on it." Kinny felt hot. "That is, I live there. See, Mr. Vogel—Hob, I mean—it's like this. Dad saved J.D.'s life when he got killed. Steer broke out o' the shipping pen an' made straight for J.D. Dad—he was range boss—he jumped in the way an' tried to throw it afoot."

"That sounds like old Kinnikin," Vogel observed. "Crazy loon. The steer got him, eh? So that's how it happened. This brother o' yours—Grant his name, you said? Does he—h'm—kinda work for the Big Arrow, too?"

"No." Kinny flushed at what he thought was a tinge of gentle sarcasm. "J.D. took Grant east with him after Dad was killed. He's done an awful lot for Grant. Grant wrote an' told me. First letter I've had from him in a dog's age. He kinda hinted J. D. aims to do the same for me, this time he comes down. Give me oppor-

tunities, Grant said, to make somethin' o' myself. 'Course, it's always been kinda understood he would."

"Has, eh?" Vogel stuffed a blackened old stubby pipe with blacker Mexican tobacco, seemingly absorbed in the small task. "Well, then, that's fine. Future's all laid out for you, eh? This J.D.—I take it he's payin' you two boys for what your dad did. Goin' to make somethin' of you, eh? Old Kinnikin'd like that."

He struck a match on his pants, sucked the spluttering flame into the dry tobacco, and thoughtfully blew a thin jet of smoke at a fly on his horse's ear.

"Yessir, old Kinnikin'd like that," he repeated. "He never amounted to much, himself, 'count of missin' them kind of opportunities. Just worked an' rambled round, an' took a hand where things were happening. Didn't know 'nough to squawk when he was hungry an' tired. Raised cattle an' a little hell here an' there. An' a family. Got himself killed, finally savin 'another feller. Left nothin' but a rep behind him for old coots like me to 'member. A plumb wasted life. Eh?"

He barked "Eh?" again, short and sharply, when Kinny didn't answer. Kinny was looking up the street at the party of men coming along it.

"I reckon there's J.D. an' the rest," said Kinny hurriedly, glad to get off the subject. "I—if you like, I'll make you known to him."

Hob Vogel took a long look. "Nev' mind," he murmured, and swung up into his saddle. "I'm leavin'. Pretty busy down at the camp. We pull out today."

THERE was that in his voice and manner which was curt and cool, an indifference that was sudden and abrupt. Kinny stood undecided, keenly and unhappily aware that he had somehow put himself in a poor light, yet not quite knowing why, nor what to do about it. He heard a penetrating voice, and looked, and saw it was J.D. talking.

"Ah, how d'you do—er—hum—how d'you do? What? No. No—no. Just down for a day or two. Ah, there—how d'you do?"

An affable, democratic man, J. D. Bayard; he prided himself on being that way. Money, he often said, did not make a man, and the mere possession of wealth was no criterion to a man's real value. He was, he would affirm with a wave of a dollar cigar in the pleasant afterglow of old brandy, a plain man of simple tastes, with a liking for other plain men.

If, on occasion, condescension crept into his large manner, his generosity usually offset the minor fault. He could be lavish, when in the mood. And he could be acrid and brittle-eyed when his mood swung the other way. The insulated little world in which he moved and was king adapted itself to his changes.

He had size to him, and solid flesh, with a tracery of little red veins on his full cheeks that gave him a healthy look. His hands looked soft, but not his face. Fine linen. Conservative, well-cut clothes. A retreating hairline, and a coming paunch. Eyes that showed what they were meant to show, and nothing more.

Vogel, moving off after his riders, paused and looked aside. "Steer o' mine busted that buckboard," he said tersely to Fen Dexter, who had just caught sight of the wreckage and was staring at it. "Yours?"

"Belongs to Mr. Bayard, here." The Big Arrow foreman glanced at J.D.

"I'll pay for it," said Vogel. "Send the money after I get some. Can't make it right now."

"Ha? What's that? My buckboard?" J.D. sent his look at it. "Confound it, man, what the devil d'you mean by letting your cattle run loose in the street? Pay for it later, eh? Who are you?"

"Vogel's the name. From the Plateau, bound for Wyomin'."

"Bound for—!" J.D. interrupted himself with a humorless laugh. "Convenient, what?" His glance swept over the stained and sun-bleached garb.

Vogel knocked out his pipe on his heel, dropped it in his shirt pocket, the while his quiet eyes played over the heavy pink face. "Would you," he queried mildly, "be questionin' my willingness or ability to pay—which?"

To Kinny, the mild tone did not match the faded eyes. They did not look tired and absent now, those eyes. There was in them that hint of youth, and youth's recklessness, and the kind of fierce steadiness that he had seen once or twice in the eyes of his father.

J.D. must have dipped his glance into the eyes, too, and read what was there. "Ah—your ability, of course," he answered, and managed not to use to much naked sarcasm in his tone. "But let it go. I believe I can afford—"

"I'd rather pay for it," cut in Vogel, still mildly. His eyes were quiet and tired again. He nudged his sorrel and rode on after his men, with a glance and a careless farewell to Kinny. "S'long, son."

SON! Not young Kinnikin. Son! He said it as any man would say it to any chance-met young man. Completely impersonal, neither insult nor compliment. Kinny almost flinched. He felt guilty, as though he had raised high expectations in someone and then disappointed him.

A youngish man, wearing glasses and dressed practically in duplicate to J.D., stepped casually up to Kinny. "How are you, Kinny?"

Kinny mechanically took the extended hand before he recognized Grant. "Why—gosh! Howdy, Grant!"

Grant smiled, freed his hand from Kinny's pumping, and his eyes did J.D.'s trick of sweeping over faulty attire in one rapid, all-encompassing look. "A bit messed up, aren't you?" he inquired.

Kinny nodded. "Had to dog down that steer." He was trying to see exactly where Grant had changed, outside of the city clothes and glasses.

Grant was different; Kinny knew that. He'd always had that certain look about him. He took after his mother, old Kinnikin had said; had her medium brown hair and fair skin; had her brown eyes, her modulated voice and nice sense of behavior. Grant had never given any trouble, from the day he was born.

But there was something different about him. He looked more—Kinny searched in his mind for a word, failed to find one. Grant looked—well, he looked more Grant-ish than ever. That was it. He looked as if he'd been born in those clothes. He'd likely forgotten how to ride by now, after going on six years in rigs like that. He never had been such an awful good hand with a horse.

"Mr. Bayard." Grant stepped respectfully aside. "Here is Kinny." His eyes did not say just that, nor did his slightly apologetic air. The message he conveyed was, rather: "Sire, this uncouth young savage of ruffianly aspect, sketchily clad in torn and dirty raiment, bearing marks of soil and violence, smelling of horse and cow, is—and heaven bear witness that I do heartily disclaim all responsibility for the shameful fact—my younger brother."

Kinny, with ears lately become sensitive to subtle nuances, heard it that way.

J. D. Bayard, with eyes to see and ears long attuned to the finer meanings of common phrases spoken in polite gatherings, also received the full message intact. He was in the process of assuring himself that he had *not* come off second-best in the

brief tilt with that shabby cattleman, and his eyes were brittle, and so was his mood. He looked at Kinny, as at a handy and safe receptacle in which to pour the acid of his displeasure.

"Ah, Kinny, how d'you do? Rather looked for you to be at the station to meet us. Too busy, eh?"

"Yes sir—no sir." Kinny let his right hand fall, when J.D. did not appear to notice it. He wiped it on his pants and went on wiping it, not knowing what else to do with it. "That old wrinkle-horn, it—"

"Yes—yes, of course." J.D. waved details away. "Well, you'll learn in time, my boy, the—ah—importance of courtesy. Some of us learn early and easily, having an instinct for that sort of thing. Others—ah—do not." He cleared his throat. " 'The greater the man, the greater his courtesy.' It was a great man who said that. Emerson. I advise you to study the works of such great teachers. Can you read?"

"Yes sir." A spirit of candid contradiction had its way with Kinny. "But I didn't read that in anything of Emerson's. Seems like that was in Tennyson's poetry, at school. Yeah, 'twas—I 'member that line now. It was in The Last Tournament, where—"

"Emerson," said J.D. He said it distinctly, positively, with a sort of restrained wrath

"Emerson," echoed Grant, and stared in shock at Kinny.

J.D. cleared his throat again. Now he was the martyr, the long-suffering benefactor hurt by ugly ingratitude. "I have arranged to take you back with us when we leave, Kinny. You will live with Grant, attend business school, and share his advantages in my organization. Let us hope that you will adapt yourself as well as he has done to—ah—environment and opportunities of advancement. Look upon Grant as your model."

"Yes sir," Kinny said.

"But," continued J.D., "however it turns out—whatever use you make of your opportunities—it will be your loss or gain. Not mine. I will have done my duty. You understand? I ask nothing in return. Nothing."

He wheeled abruptly. "Grant!" he snapped. "For heaven's sake, stir yourself and find me a conveyance of some kind. And hurry! You—Kinny—run along and help him."

"Yes, Mr. Bayard—right away." Grant hastened over to the livery stable across the street, with Kinny on his heels.

Down by the creek, a growing commotion sent its mingled sounds into Sweetwater; wagons rumbling, men shouting, cattle pounding the earth—all the hullaballoo of a drive getting under way.

THEY sat in Kinny's room, upstairs in the Big Arrow ranchhouse. It was dark outside. Grant sat on the bed and watched Kinny packing.

"You won't need those," he said, and a prized pair of silvered spurs went into the discard pile on the floor.

"Don't cart that truck along."

Three thick switches of horsehair, white, black and sorrel, followed the spurs.

"And you certainly won't need that thing."

Kinny sat with the old gun in his hands, looking down at it. It was a Frontier model, single-action, big and heavy. Its bone butt-plates were yellow with age, smooth to the touch, and all the blue was long gone from the steel.

Kinny said, without looking up: "This was Dad's. He wore it when he was dep'ty marshal in Hondo County, time he shot it out with Jingle-bell Trist an' those other two proddies. Folks gave him a gold watch for that, with his name on it."

"I know." Grant nodded. "I don't wear that old watch any more. Too big. Pulled my vest out of shape."

"Can't just leave it here." Kinny weighed the gun in his hand, rubbing the long barrel. "Not if J.D.'s goin' to sell the place."

"He's already sold it," said Grant. "To that Rafter B fellow—Starbuck. I made out the papers this afternoon. He's a fool, Starbuck. He told me he intends hiring Dexter back on as foreman."

"Dex is a good man," defended Kinny. "J.D. hadn't ought of fired him. An' he sure didn't do right, bawlin' Dex out loud, way he did. Could hear him plain, way over in the bunkhouse."

Grant shrugged. "What are you going to do with that thing?"

"Don't rightly know." Kinny polished the gun some more, and loaded it with a couple of stray shells from his war-bag. He had slipped back in age, in the two days J.D. and Grant had been here. Felt like a bossed kid. "Can't see why I can't take it along, just as a kinda—what's that noise downstairs?"

A door had crashed open somewhere. A loud voice lifted, followed by others. The first voice sounded furious, violent. The others sounded merely startled and angry.

"Good as called me a crook, didn't he? Stand out o' my way, Starbuck!"

Kinny jumped up. "Gosh! It's Dex—sounds like he's drunk an' fightin' mad!" He headed for the open door and the stairs, Grant moving more slowly behind him.

He ran down the stairs. In the passage below, light came from the opened door of the combined living room and ranch office. Kinny gained the doorway and paused.

Fen Dexter, the usual even good humor gone from his face, stood in the middle of the big room, legs spread apart and head jutting forward. Drink and a mulling over of verbal abuse had aroused a devil in him. His face was flushed, his mouth drawn tight, and his eyes showed a glare of belligerent mischief. The shotgun in his hands was cocked and pointed at J. D. Bayard, standing beside an overturned chair.

Starbuck, a small man with pointed beard and a habit of appearing always unruffled, stood by the table. He had halted his brisk advance, and was gazing at the shotgun with a calm and calculating eye.

"Gonna run him right out on the range an' fill his boots wi' gunshot!" Dexter announced, dragging out his words. "It ain't I mind bein' fired, but he good as said—stay where y'are, Starbuck! I'm warnin' you! I know you tote a gun under that coat, but leave it there! Bayard—march out the door!"

In this moment J. D. Bayard exhibited the cool nerve and control that went with the command of a financial empire.

"You're drunk," he said contemptuously. "Get out of here!"

His will-power seemed to spread out and fill the room. Dexter stood teetering a little, indecision coming to his red face. The shotgun dropped. Then it whipped up again. Dexter snorted.

"March!" he growled. "Or I'll blow your hair off! I'll not be fazed by a—"

"Dex!" Kinny stepped into the lighted room, and three pairs of eyes swung to him. "Drop it, Dex."

He saw Dexter's eyes sweep from his face to the bone-handled gun held dangling in his hand. Dexter's face went stiff and ugly-hard. He didn't have the look of a man facing a younger one he had known since toddling days. He had the look of a man with a gun challenged by another man with a gun. The shotgun moved slightly.

"Drop it, Dex," Kinny said again, and his voice was deep and steady.

He almost felt the seasoning years rush upon him, and knew that he was as old as he would ever be.

The shotgun moved again. Dexter, under the stress of drink and daring, was taking up the challenge. He was no longer the dry and amiable range boss. He was a desperate man on the prod. The shotgun whirled around. There was a small gasp from J. D. Starbuck did not move, seeming to have passed the matter over to Kinny.

It seemed a very natural thing to tilt and fire the old gun. The kick of it, too, felt natural to Kinny's palm.

The thudding, deep-toned roar—the sharp clang of struck metal—the blast of the shotgun as it went off and sent its charge into a side-wall—all made one deafening sound. The ruined shotgun clattered on the floorboards. Dexter looked at his stinging hands, and shook his head, and suddenly looked sober.

Starbuck took out a handkerchief and carefully wiped his forehead. "Thanks, Kinny," he murmured. "Dexter, mebby you better turn in an' get some sleep. I'll want you to help me check over the stock tomorrow. G'night."

Dexter stumbled out, speechless, awkward, and J. D. came forward around the table. He was a trifle pale, and he wet his lips before speaking to Kinny.

"You probably saved my life." He said it as to a man and an equal. His surface bluster was laid aside. Genuine feeling made his voice subdued. "I owe the Kincaids a lot. First your father, and now you."

THERE was an ease in Kinny that was new and yet familiar. Now, more than ever, he could understand the forces and the inconsequential motives that had gone to fashion his father's life. That plumb wasted life; Kinny recalled Hob Vogel's words, and smiled.

"You don't owe us anything, Mr. Bayard. My dad rambled around an' took a hand where things were happenin'. He got fun out of it. Didn't want nor expect to be paid. When somethin' happened, he took a hand. Couldn't help himself. If he'd hated you, he'd still have jumped at that steer."

"Queer men, the Kincaids," said J. D., and smiled with him. "Grant's the only one of you I seem to understand."

Kinny slapped Grant on the shoulder as he left the room. "S'long, Grant. Good luck."

THE dusty haze thickened, and now Kinny could see the low black line of the moving herd through it, and hear more plainly the sullen thunder of hoofs. The chuck-wagon was halted off to the far right, and men in the saddle were drinking at the back of it, from tin mugs that a dismounted man filled from the water kegs roped to the side of the wagon.

Kinny rode that way, and saw the blur of their faces as they turned to regard him. He loped up and drew rein, Vogel, at the water keg, silently handed him up a filled mug, and his sun-faded eyes took on a stir of recognition as they flicked briefly to the old bone-handled gun in its old, worn holster.

Kinny blew dust from his lips, wiped them, and drank. He handed back the empty mug. "That job still open, Hob?"

Vogel nodded. "She is, Kinnikin. Go relieve Obie on left point. He's nigh dead. All right, you jiggers—let's push 'em along." He cracked a grin at Kinny. "Long way to a soft bed, amigo!"

Riding around the edge of the herd to left point, Kinnikin sang behind the bandana that covered his nose and mouth from the thick dust. It was good to be riding herd up the long trail with an honest-to-Sam outfit like this-here rolling Tree L.

A Stirring Novelette of Rustlers' Retribution

NO BOOTS

CHAPTER I

Smokepole Savvy!

DANNY CARR jerked the chestnut's reins as suddenly as a man who finds he has just ridden into a trap.

Yet, except for one thing, Eagle was just another town. No different from scores of similar settlements between the Brazos and the Yellowstone. A hundred yard loop would have encircled it from the false-fronted general store and the feed stable to the Sitting Bull saloon.

That one thing might be important, though. For not a single face had showed in sight. Not a single face, as Danny's chestnut, with the riderless roan behind, clup-clupped into the short main street.

It was a full moment before Danny put the chestnut in motion again. His eyes were wary, and right hand hovered near his holster.

Then as he passed the saloon, he viewed the space between and to the rear of it and the stable. He drew rein again, but this time relaxed in his saddle.

Down there near the back of the saloon, he could dimly see through the gathering dusk what seemed to be the entire population of Eagle, clustered near a line marked by two black hats thrown on the ground.

AND SADDLES

By WES FARGO

Gun trickery boogered Danny Carr when he rode into that horse-rustling war—to win his battle for life and death

Both white men and Indians cheered madly as the thundering racers neared the finish line.

And toward that line, from out on the flat, two horsemen were spurring hard, shoulders hunched and bending low, one atop a claybank, the other on a deep bay horse.

Even as Danny watched, the clustered men threw up their hats. The bay horse had crossed the line a full length ahead of the claybank. Its rider checked it, swung around, yelling in triumph.

"What'd I tell you, Hagan? Unbeaten a year, an' still good as ever. Even that racer from Ft. Keogh 'ud have to go to—"

"Shut up, Hondo! You talk too much!" A big, black-bearded man had pushed forward out of the group, his sharp eyes turned suddenly on Danny.

Hondo, the rider of the bay, pulled up, swung down.

He was small—not over five feet, three—but with the seamed face of a man of forty. And even in the dusk, Danny could see the countless pits of the smallpox scars that peppered Hondo's face like birdshot.

Danny Carr reached to his pocket, carelessly rolled a quirly. "Hiya, gents. Settlin' a little argyment over hosses?" His voice carried the unmistakable drawl of Texas.

"Hosses?" The black-bearded man could not have weighed less than two hundred, and his neck was like a

bull's. He chuckled. "Jest Hondo, here, and Sam, argyin' whether a bay c'n outrun a claybank. Looks like Sam loses and has to bed and feed Hondo's hoss as long as Hondo is in town."

But for a man who had lost a race and a bet, Sam, who was gaunt and hook-nosed, seemed undisturbed.

Hondo had stepped close to Danny's chestnut, was looking over its clean flanks and slender hocks appreciatively. "Runnin' hoss, huh?"

"Some."

"Bit o' Morgan in 'im, ain't it?"

"Some."

Blackbeard broke in. "Can't you see the gent's too dry an' dusty to talk? . . . Rest yore saddle, mister, an' come have a drink. I'm Bull Hagan."

Danny crumpled his quirly out. "If that drink 'ull save 'till I step over to the store, I'd take it an' obliged. The name is Carr—Danny Carr."

"Shore it'll save. Drift over anytime, Carr."

The big man turned toward the saloon, most of the others following. Danny Carr left his mounts at the Sitting Bull hitchrack and crossed to the general store.

"Gimme a can o' sardines, box o' crackers, an' can o' peaches," he said to the lean storekeeper.

The storekeeper set out the articles and a can opener.

"You talk like you're from 'way south. Must have a good hoss to come all that way for the Lodgepole races."

"Fair." Danny washed the sardines and crackers down with a dipper of water from the storekeeper's water-bucket. From where he ate he could keep an eye on the chestnut and the roan. "But I didn't come all the way just for the races. I been bustin' bronks here and there. You got any mouth-harps, mister?"

"Shore." The storekeeper set out a box. "Take yore pick. Four bits each."

Danny looked them over, selected a middle-sized one, and pushed his money across the counter. "Soaked my other'n, crossin' the Platte, and rusted her so I had to chuck her away."

He started for the door. The storekeeper clinked the money greedily.

"Wouldn't care to sell that chestnut, would you, Mister? I'd give you a hunderd for 'im."

"Much obliged, but I ain't sellin'."

AS HE crossed the street, Danny could feel the greedy eyes of the storekeeper still upon him.

He could understand that, though. Most places in a cow and horse country like Montana were hoss-minded; Eagle more than most, he judged. And that was understandable, too, bordering as it did on the Crow Reservation, with the Cheyennes just beyond. Crows and Cheyennes were the horse-lovingest Injuns in the country. An Injun buck would swap his squaw for a likely horse any time. Especially with the Lodgepole races coming up.

Now there were sensible folks for you—Injuns. Didn't have holidays and celebrations scattered all over, just 'cause something had happened 'way back on a certain day of a certain month. Injuns celebrated when and as they had something to celebrate for. Green Corn dances—Ripe Corn dances—and Hunter's moon. Bucks gathering for hundreds of miles, with a whole week of dancing, and hoss-racing every day. You couldn't get a pile of hoss-loving bucks like the Crows together without just naturally having horse-racing—and gambling.

Danny looked at the tie ropes of the roan and the chestnut as he passed, and went into the Sitting Bull.

Bull Hagan was there, and Hondo, and half a dozen others, with a fat-faced bartender behind the bar.

Bull Hagan was boss, though. No doubt of it. When he talked, the other men listened.

Hagan saw Danny, and slapped the bar.

"She's all set an' waiting. . . . Slide out the bottle, Dave. Ain't every day we c'n slake a thirst built up all the way from Texas."

Danny filled his glass, waited till Hagan had his poured.

"Salud!" He emptied the glass, wiped his lips and ignored the water chaser. The bartender dumped the water with a grunt.

"Been looking at them hosses o' yores." Bull Hagan slapped Danny on the shoulder with a chuckle of high good will. "Chestnut is purty, and the roan don't look so bad. I'd give you a hundred and twenty-five for the chestnut, and seventy-five for the roan."

Danny shook his head. "I'd hafta walk outa town—an' I hate walkin'."

"Wouldn't have to walk. I'd have Sam throw in a couple of better'n fair hosses to boot." Hagan leaned closer, confidentially. "Got a special reason for wantin' that chestnut. A feller's own hosses get a leetle too well known in the neighborhood—ruins the bettin'. But a new horse now, that's strange to the country—I might even give you a hunderd an' fifty, mister."

"Much obliged," said Danny. "But I raised that chestnut from a colt. An' I sorta like that hammerhead roan just 'cause he is so damn ornery. You know how it is."

"Shore, shore. Feller sort o' gits used to a hoss. . . . Well, if you change your mind, the offer still stands."

One of the horses outside at the hitchrack snorted just then, and Danny looked up. But it was only the stableman, Sam, coming in. He slid up to the far end of the bar and ordered whiskey.

Hondo and three others had taken a dirty pack of cards from the bartender and started a poker game. But after only a couple of deals, Hondo threw down the cards with an oath.

"Four-handed game ain't no damn good. Not enough cards buckin' each other. . . . Hey, anybody want to make a fifth?"

Hagan touched Danny's arm and chuckled again. "Want to set in an' git some of that money Hondo's rarin' to lose? Hondo yells better'n he plays."

"No, thanks." Danny shook his head. "All I ever draws is deuces."

"Play 'er deuces wild an' you can't lose, then. Not the way Hondo plays poker anyway. You c'ud run up your stake for the Lodgepole races."

"Nope. Reckon I'll just sit and watch."

DANNY pulled out a chair and tilted it back, lazylike, his eyes on the players. But he had tilted it so that, through the front window, he could see the two horses, now nothing more than shadows at the hitchrack.

Bull Hagan had moved to the other end of the bar, was talking in low tones to Sam, the stableman.

The smoke in the saloon grew thicker, the voices of the poker players rose higher as they wrangled over the hands.

All at once Danny's lips tightened, his eyes narrowed.

The roan had snorted again. And through the window Danny could see a swift-moving, smaller shadow blend into the big one that was the chestnut.

The man, whoever he was, was at the chestnut's neck. The chestnut moved nervously, edged closer to the roan. For a second the shadow of the man was blotted out between the two horses. Then there was the quick flare of a match, almost invisible beyond the bulk of the roan.

Danny slid his feet under him,

slipped his right hand toward his holstered gun. And then—he dropped his hand again, a little smile twitching the corners of his lips.

For, with the match flare had come a wild snort. Not of fear, but of rage. The roan's ugly head had tossed high. There was the pound of steel-shod hoofs—a half-muffled curse. Then the smaller shadow was gone, only the two horses left, twisting and stamping nervously.

"Whatsa matter with yore hosses?" demanded the bartender, glancing through the door.

"Jest that damn roan pesterin' that chestnut o' mine," sighed Danny. "Someday I'm goin' to hafta take a club to that durn hoss."

The bartender grunted. The others apparently had noticed nothing.

But Danny's brows furrowed. The match—that was puzzling. A horse-thief didn't need to strike a match—

Unconsciously, with the habit of years, his hand slid to his pocket, drew out the new harmonica, dusted it against his thigh. Some men thought better with a straw in their mouths, or chewing a leaf. But Danny liked a harmonica. Covering it with his knuckled hand, he softly began to play "Buffalo Gals."

He didn't realize anyone had heard until the bartender spoke approvingly.

"Not bad. Not bad a' tall. Can you play S'wanee River?"

Danny obliged, and followed it with "Massa's in the Cold, Cold Ground."

At the table, Hondo slapped his cards down.

"Hell, don't you know nothin' but them damn nigger graveyard tunes? How c'n a man draw good cards to graveyard music like that?"

It was seemingly only the grouch of a poor loser. But out of the corner of his eyes Danny had seen the stableman, Sam, edging over—edging over.

"Sorry, mister." Danny wiped his harp, started to slide it back into his pocket. "Didn't mean to pester you."

But Hondo was on his feet now. And the stableman's gun-hand was above the bar.

"You ruint my game with yore kind o' music—now I'm askin' you to play mine." Hondo's eyes were beady, his jaw outthrust. "Somethin' lively, *Tejano*. Play 'Marchin' through Georgia'!"

Danny's eyes flickered, but his voice was a peaceful drawl. "Sorry—but I don't know the Yankee tunes, Mister."

"Still rememberin' the lickin' the Yanks give you Rebs, huh?" Hondo's voice was a jeer. "You come from right next door to Mexico—you oughta know all the Mex tunes, then. Play *'La Cucaracha'!"*

To a hot-headed Texan, *"La Cucaracha"* is a greater insult even than the Yankee bummers' song. Born out of the Mexican War, *"La Cucaracha"* meaning "The Cockroach," and its original Mexican verses bite slanderously and obscenely at the hated "gringo," especially those from the Lone Star state.

Danny Carr's face whitened. His feet moved slightly under him. But his voice was still mild as he answered:

"Never heard o' that 'un, Mister."

"Yo're a damn liar! Every Texas cockroach knows—"

The rest of the sentence was bitten off. Even as he spoke, Hondo's hand was darting holsterward.

But Danny Carr had left the chair. His hand was a blur of speed that ended in the gleam of steel and the blast of thunder. But when he fired, it was not at Hondo. It was at the stableman, Sam, whose gun was already whipping upward.

The heavy .45 bullet found the stableman's shoulder, spun him around and back as if he were pounded with a sledge. The unfired gun bounced out of his hand, onto

the floor. And Hondo, eyes wide, incredulous, froze in his own draw, staring into the smoking muzzle that suddenly whirled and yawned in his face.

"Drop it!" snapped Danny Carr, no longer lazy now, but a coiled mass of human springs. "Drop it—or else finish it!"

IT WAS not Hondo that was the danger, though. Danny could see Hondo and Hagan and most of the others. But the door and two windows were open invitations for a shot from the dark—and the bartender was almost directly behind him. And behind every bar, in towns like Eagle, a sawed-off shotgun was as much of a bartender's equipment as the bar bottles.

It *would be* the bartender! Danny's ears caught the slight scuffle behind him. He saw it in Hondo's face, too—in his snake-like eyes, the lift of his thin lips. If Danny turned to face the bartender, Hondo would finish his draw and shoot like a flash. Already Hondo's hand was quivering—

"Hold it, Pock-face!" The words came from nowhere, like a bolt from the blue. "And you, bartender—you c'n jest put that scatter-gun right back where you h'isted it from. Hustle!"

Hondo's mouth had sagged open. Surprise was written in the faces of the other men out there in front. And then Danny saw whence that amazing voice had come.

A long rifle-barrel poked through the black port of a side-window but it was centered, not on Danny, but somewhere behind him. The face of the rifleman was a dim blur in the outer dark—just a blur of face and gaunt, drooping mustaches, under a sag-brimmed hat.

Then Danny heard the sigh of the bartender and the thud of the sawed-off shotgun dropped back into place.

"So fur, so good," approved the amazing rifleman in the window, and the rifle barrel slid along the sill. "Hope springs etarnal—but I'm warnin' you other gents ag'in puttin' too much faith in 'er— All except you, Pock-face. You c'n git on with yore draw if yo're hankerin' to finish it."

But the white beads of perspiration stood out on Hondo's forehead, and the Colt slid from his fingers to the floor.

"Now, Texas," said the unseen rifleman, "you better rattle yore hocks while the rattlin' is good. Git out the door an' to yore hoss. I'll keep 'em kivered, but it ain't likely they'll stand all night."

Danny waited no longer. With a half dozen strides he was at the door and through it. He hit the ground running, and made for the hitchrack. Mounted, with the roan crowding close to the chestnut, he whirled around the side of the saloon, toward the window where his unknown friend had been.

But the window was empty. The rifleman had vanished as mysteriously as he had appeared.

Then the light in the saloon suddenly went out. The darkened building rang with trampling feet and Hondo's wild curses.

"Outside! Git outside an' git 'em! They can't git far! Git hosses an' ride—!"

Danny slammed two bullets through the window to cool their enthusiasm. At the same moment he heard hoofs start pounding suddenly from the dark somewhere back of the store. Not one horse, but two. The sound was going away, growing fainter, toward the west.

Puzzled, but grateful, Danny swung the chestnut around, with the roan snubbed close, and spurred due east. As Hagan's men poured from the saloon, he threw a couple more shots back at them. He heard the

first trampling noise of the pursuit, drawn by his deliberately fired shots. They were heading his way, not the other.

He had no fear that they would overtake the roan and the chestnut. There were few horses that could. After half an hour's steady gallop, he pulled up, listened.

There was no sound on the night now.

Danny Carr sat and smoked a quirly frowningly.

It did not make sense—the attempt to buy his horses, then to get him into a fixed poker game, and, that failing, to force him into a fight. And more inexplicable was the mysterious rifleman.

Danny Carr shook his head in defeat.

"Only one thing is clear," he grunted whimsically, "and that is, Eagle is shore a town where they take a real int'rest in hosses. Any man's hosses!"

Turning and making a circle around Eagle, Danny rode steadily toward the west; toward the foothill passes and on, eventually, to the Lodgepole Agency.

CHAPTER II
Hoss Thief!

THE Lodgepole Agency was a cluster of four buildings, its location chosen for the special convenience of the red wards of the Great White Father. The agency was in a high valley and nestled against a stream, mountain-fed from its headwaters in icy springs. Before it stretched a grassy meadow, a mile wide and several miles long, big enough for the tepees of a thousand warriors.

When Danny Carr rode past slowly, the creek was already lined by the countless tepees of the gathered tribes. A hundred campfires sent up thin tendrils of smoke, and blanket-clad squaws lugged firewood and water, while lordly bucks stalked here and there, above the woman's work of camp-tending. On the meadow, countless half-grown Indian boys tended the pony herds or staged impromptu races with their own half-wild ponies.

There were a couple dozen white men who camped by themselves, aloof from the tepees and wrangling squaws. A red-headed horse-buyer from Bozeman and the Missouri was circulating among the herds, picking out likely ponies for his subsequent bartering.

Danny Carr staked his own camp out by itself, in a little, lush meadow pinched between the creek and a small grove of trees. He unsaddled his horses, hobbled them, and built a tiny fire of dried twigs and cooked his supper of bacon and beans and coffee. He finished his after-supper cigarette, then lay back against his saddle and pulled out his harp and played softly to himself as the dusk faded and the black curtain of night fell.

AT THE sound of approaching hoofs, he put down his harp, but continued to lie there, half-pillowed against his saddle. The saddle was a bullet-proof rampart behind his back, though, and his Colt .45 lay loose in its holster.

But the horseman was a single rider, and as he rode up and halted in the firelight, Danny sucked in a silent breath.

The man on the horse was gaunt, bare-boned. He sat in the saddle with a certain odd stiffness. But it was not these things that had caught Danny's attention.

The horseman wore an old and droopy wide-brimmed hat. And the firelight gleamed on a seamed and weather-beaten face, and a pair of

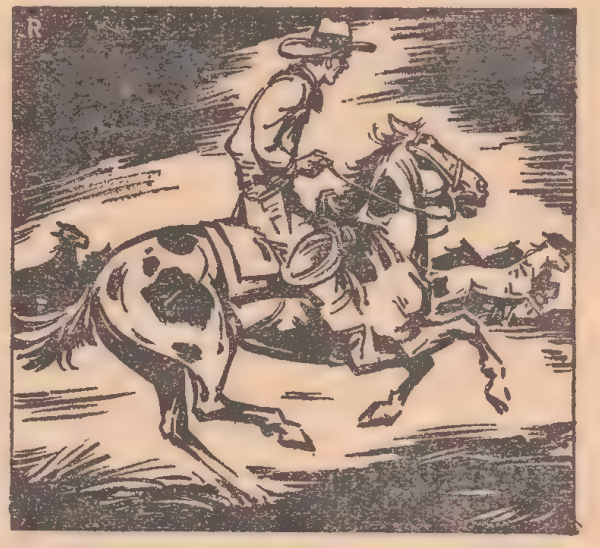
gaunt gray mustaches, drooped walrus-like at the ends.

"Heard a harp—and knowed it wasn't no warhoop playin'," the stranger said calmly. "Do I light—or do I get the hell out?"

Danny sat up, kicked the fire together, threw on some more dry twigs. "Light, an' set. I'll heat up the Java—"

"Already et." The gaunt man swung down. Now Danny could see the twinkling blue eyes beneath the bushy brows, the leathery hands with freckles so dark that they looked black. "The handle is Moore — though some folks call me Bible Joe."

"Danny Carr," Danny said, indicating himself. His swift glance took in the tall horse, the heavy saddle. The brand "U.S." was big on the horse's flank, but the rifle holstered in the gun boot under the stirrup leather was not a cavalry carbine—it was too long, too big. Only an old-fashioned Sharps "buffalo" gun would be as big as that.



The herd thundered into a stampede as Danny spooked them with a shrill yell.

A puzzled furrow came between his own eyes. "Never met you before—but I think I've *seen* you before. Leastways I seen that rifle."

Bible Joe chuckled. "She's onwieldly at times, but she's got her uses. Like pokin' into winders—"

"Howcome you did it?" inquired Danny bluntly. "You didn't know me—"

"No, but I know Bull Hagan. Leastways I know of him. An' that wa'n't no way to treat the stranger within the gates—gangin' up on him like that."

He seated himself, drew out a stubby pipe, loaded it with tobacco.

"Come for the races?" Danny shot a glance at the tall bay horse with the U.S. brand.

"Uh-huh."

"That don't look like a runnin' horse you got."

"Ain't. But that don't say I can't look at other fellers' hosses, does it?" He lighted his pipe, then with his eyes still twinkling, he raised his voice. "Reckon you c'n come on in now, Hawk."

To Danny's startled surprise, a drifting shadow slid by almost at his shoulder, coming from where he would have sworn there had been nothing but his hobbled horses a moment before. Then as the newcomer glided to the opposite side of the fire, Danny saw that it was a young Indian buck.

But he was no ordinary buck. He was as straight as an arrow; as clean as a bronze statue. The air was crisp and cold, yet he stood only in breechclout and moccasins. A single feather stood out from his jet black warrior's lock.

He certainly was all *man*.

"Not horse," he grunted gutturally. "Him dam' brown horse."

Danny started up. "Brown horse? You mean you been lookin'—" Suddenly he let out an angry snort. "Now I know. It was you, pestering around my horses outside the saloon!"

Bible Joe grinned. "Yeah, but that infernal roan almost tromped my brains out 'fore I got a good look. . . . Bring 'em up to the fire, Hawk, an' I'll finish lookin'."

Danny Carr was mad. Mad clear through. His hand slipped toward his holstered Colt. "Them horses are mine. Anybody lays hands on 'em—"

He stopped. Seemingly without motion, the gaunt stranger had moved his hand up out of the shadows. And the muzzle of the pistol in it was steady on Danny's middle.

"Set still, young feller. The Hawk says it ain't the horse, an' I never knowed him to be wrong yet. But I ain't rode two hunderd miles to go back without seein' with my own eyes. . . . Bring 'em in, Hawk."

Without a word, the young Indian slipped into the darkness, to return in a moment with the chestnut and roan, both pulling back on their ropes and snorting at the strange smell of the Indian. The warrior led the chestnut into the firelight; waved his hand. "Not horse," he repeated tersely, positively. "See—him all dam' brown."

"Uh-huh—Chestnut. But at night and from a distance, he might a' been bay." Bible Joe was satisfied with a single glance. "Take 'em back, Hawk."

Danny relaxed, but his tones were puzzled.

"Now that you done found out that chestnut ain't a bay, and has got four legs and is reg'lar in gen'ral, mebbe you'd tell me just what bay hoss it is yo're huntin'."

"A stole hoss," said Bible Joe succinctly.

"Yore own hoss?"

"He was stole, that's enough. Red as old leather. Fact is, that's what they call him—Apache."

"There's a bay horse in Eagle—a fast one," Danny said thoughtfully. "Hondo was riding him, in a try-out race against a claybank."

Bible Joe shook his head. "Heard o' that Hondo hoss. Hagan's had im a year—and won a dozen races with 'im. This bay I'm lookin' for has just been stole recent."

Danny was silent a moment. "I was goin' to ask you to camp alongside. But I don't reckon I will. Never did cotton to deserters—and hoss-thieves."

"Deserter?" Bible Joe's eyes opened. "How you know?"

"Boots and saddles," said Danny. "A U.S.-branded hoss, an' you set your saddle like a cavalryman."

"Ever been in the cav-lry?" Bible Joe's eyes twinkled.

"No—an' not aimin' to."

"Then you don't know what a trial an' a tribulation an ornery officer c'n be. Sarved with ev'ry sort o' officer all over these hills since Custer was a shave-tail, a'most—but that Cap'n Corrigan was the orneriest. Sarved him right when I rid off an' left him cussin' a blank file." He smiled sardonically.

"Stole a Gover'ment mount to ride off on, too, I see," said Danny sharply. "Or mebbe this Captain Corrigan give you that mount to git rid of you?"

Bible Joe tapped out his pipe. "He'd have the firin' squad out after me now, if he knowed where I was. Durn a man from County Cork, anyway!"

Danny crunched his own quirly out. "You done me a good turn back there at Eagle. I ain't turnin' you in—but if I was you I'd put plenty distance between me an' this country. Cavalry's li'ble to ride most anywheres. An' from what I hear, they got a long arm for deserters."

"Much obliged. But I like this country." Bible Joe grunted, stood up. "When I rid out on the Cap'n, I took with me the savin's of fifteen years soldierin'. Figure to look around till I find the place that suits me, an' start me a small ranch. Cattle on a thousand hills—that's better'n boots and saddles an' a ornery Cork County man cussin' you ev'ry weekday an' twice on Sundays . . . Come on, Hawk."

Without a backward glance he swung into the saddle, turned, and rode out of the fire-light circle. Behind him, the Indian melted away as soundlessly as a shadow.

Danny Carr sat for a long while thinking. Then, before he went to sleep, he brought the hobbled horses in closer, staked them just beyond the fire.

But when he awoke at early dawn, only the hammer-headed roan was cropping the grass of the little meadow. The chestnut was gone and the stake rope sliced.

THERE was no use trying to trail the chestnut or the thieves. Out in the valley, a thousand hoofs had crossed and crisscrossed, overlaying the meadow with a labyrinth of tracks. The Crows were notorious horse-thieves, exceeded only by the Cheyennes.

But Danny Carr remembered the walrus-mustached deserter and his Indian buck, and their interest the night before. He mounted the hammerhead roan and rode to the agency with a gleam in his eye.

To his surprise Bull Hagan and others he had seen at Eagle were there. Or rather they were camped close to the Agency store, with their herd close hobbled under the watchful eye of the stableman Sam whose shoulder was bandaged with a dirty cloth. Hagan and Hondo and the others were shooting hilariously at a mark with rifles, gibing and betting on the results of each shot. A dozen or more Crow braves stood watching them. The Indians' blankets were drawn about their ears, their coppery faces immobile.

But there was psychology in that seemingly innocent pastime of shooting at a mark. It was a favorite trick of whites venturing among outnumbering braves. Danny knew, and Hagan knew, that each beady-eyed warrior, who was watching each shot of those hard-hitting Winchesters, would carry back to their tribes the tales of the fighting power of those dozen rifles. Indians would think twice before raiding the horse-herd of the men from Eagle.

Danny rode that way. As he passed, he shot a quick glance over the herd. But the chestnut was not there. He had not expected it to be. But the man Sam, eyed him malevolently as he passed.

Hagan, though, greeted him with a surprising wave of welcome, and a whole-hearted chuckle.

"Light an' jine, Texas. She's wide open, at a dollar a shot. If yore shootin' eye is good, your dollar c'n bring you ten, each hull that you bust."

Danny's eye roamed toward the scowling Hondo.

Hagan saw the look, chuckled again. "Shucks, nobody's totin' any grudge. Boys will be boys, an' you done showed Hondo yore draw's faster'n his. Ain't no reason for you an' Hondo to be after each other's scalps for a little disagreement that's plum' gone an' forgotten . . . Light an' jine, Texas."

Danny swung off and ground-tied his roan, but left his Winchester in its boot under the stirrup. Hondo's little eyes blinked.

"Savin' your chestnut for the races, huh?"

"No." Danny's eyes met Hondo's squarely. "Somebody must have thought that Chestnut was a likely winner. Because somebody stole that Chestnut last night."

"Shore, now?" Bull Hagan's eyes opened wide. He clucked sympathetically. "Yore runnin' hoss, too! Damn shame—! Have you looked in them Crow an' Cheyenne herds for 'im?"

Danny shook his head. "Whoever stole him, wouldn't leave him around in sight. I'd know him—"

"Well, if any of us git a sight of

him, you can jest bet we'll give you a hand cuttin' him out, Texas. Won't do to let these bucks git the idee they can run off white men's hosses an' git away with it. . . . Might as well bust a few cartridges, Mister. Ain't nothin' you c'n do about the chestnut right now."

Danny shook his head. But suddenly he started, looked around. From his shoulder had come an unmistakable voice. "Reckon I'll jest git in an' see how the water is, myself—if she's open to all comers."

It was Bible Joe who stood there, with the silent Hawk beside him. They had come so soundlessly that their approach had not been noticed. Then Danny saw their two horses ground-hitched, a dozen paces back.

The buck was empty-handed, but Bible Joe carried in his hands his long Sharps. Lovingly he unwrapped it from the dressed buckskin that protected its lock.

"How much is the ante to get into this shoot?" he inquired.

"Everybody puts a dollar in the pot—everybody gets one shot each, free hand. Closest one to the mark collects the pot," explained Hagan.

THE "mark" was nothing more than a round silver dollar, nailed to the bark of a big pine almost a hundred paces away. From where they stood, it looked little more than a tiny white spot against the brown bark. Danny realized why Hagan had said "the closest one to the mark." Even in a land of good shots, the marksman who could hit that dollar at that distance was more than ordinary—he was an exceptional shot.

Bible Joe took out an old leather wallet, dropped a silver dollar in the little ring that made the "pot." The others followed suit. The first marksman, Hondo, took up his position on the marked line.

With the sharp crack of the Winchester, Hondo gave a grunt. A speck of bark had leaped out not three inches from the silver circle that was the dollar. Instantly the half-breed boy from the agency store ran from behind a rock and plugged the hole with a whittled peg carved with the shooter's special mark.

Hondo gave a grunt of satisfaction. "Closer'n the one that won the last pot. That'n 'ull do me."

Bull Hagan fired and was an inch farther away. But the fifth man that fired hit within two inches of the dollar. Hondo gave a curse.

Last of the ten, the old-timer stepped forward. He blew on his sight, squinted along the barrel, and almost before the Sharps had come to a level, pressed the trigger. At the heavy crash of the Sharps and the thud of the bullet, the half-breed ran to drive a trimmed twig squarely between the dollar and the fifth marksman's shot.

Bible Joe raked in the money with a grin. "She's more blessed to give than to receive. . . . Much obliged, gents."

Five successive times the heavy Sharps bullet tore into the bark inside the nearest competing shot. And five times the old-timer raked in the dozen wagered dollars.

"Luck—that old buffalo gun is covered with luck," grouched the man Hondo after the sixth shot. "Nobody livin' could shoot that close except by accident."

"Some puts their trust in hosses an' some in chareeuts," said Bible Joe. "Dunno what them chareeuts was, but they must a' been good if them Eegyptuns preferred 'em to a Sharps."

Hondo threw in his next dollar with an oath. He swore still louder when his bullet was marked well off to the right. But when Bull Hagan fired in his turn, there went up a yell. With the Winchester crack, the silver mark had leaped from its place on the tree. The half-breed pegged the bullet hole and then brought the silver target it-

self to the firing line. A nick in the outer edge showed where the bullet had clipped away the minting.

Hagan chuckled in triumph. "Might jest as well rake in this pot an' start the next one. If anybody here c'n beat that one—"

But Bible Joe stayed his arm. "Takes a lot o' shootin'—but a man c'n always try."

"You think you can beat that shot?" Bull Hagan's voice was surprised.

"Can't tell—till ol' Miz Sharps has spoke her piece."

"Wait." Hagan's voice was suddenly quick, greedy. He was digging into his pocket. "I've got five hundred dollars to fifty, that says that shot can't be beat."

"Gamblin' is sinful—but even Joseph's brothers cast lots for his raiment," said Bible Joe. Slowly he brought forth the worn wallet, counted five gold eagles into the ring on the ground. "If I lose, it'll be a jedgment ag'in me for gamblin'. But there she is."

Hagan covered the five gold pieces with fifty like ones.

"You only get the one shot," he reminded.

For the first time then, the old-timer seemed to take special care with his aim. He brought the old buffalo gun up, lowered it, raised it again. For a long moment it seemed to be a part of the frozen statue that was both man and gun. Then with the bloom of the smoke and the crash of the report, the silver target leaped from the tree again. The half-breed did not wait this time to plug the hole—he came running with the dislodged target.

Hagan and the others crowded around. Then Hondo's voice rose in amazement and disbelief. "Center—plum' center! I wouldn't believed it if I hadn't seen it with my own eyes."

Bull Hagan lost his chuckle for the first time. There was an unmistakable rasp in his voice.

"You win . . . but I don't believe it wasn't accident, yet."

"Seein' is believin'." Bible-Joe gathered up the gold pieces, tucked them into his now bulging wallet. "An' that'll be all f'r today. The pitcher that goes too oft to the well gits busted. An' I figger them gold pieces'll come in handy, when the hosses start runnin'!"

Without another word, he turned and started for his horse, the silent, breech-clouted Indian beside him. After a moment's hesitation, Danny followed, caught up with him.

Bible-Joe's faded blue eyes twinkled as Danny drew alongside.

"How, Texas." Then, with a chuckle: "Hagan's been givin' them Injuns a leetle lesson—an' mebbe he got a leetle lesson hisself . . . You ridin' my way?"

Danny's eyes were cold. "Somebody stole the chestnut last night—after you left. You were the last one . . ."

"Sho', sho'—an' so you figger I maybe c'ud tell you somethin' about where he went." Bible Joe grinned frankly. "Dunno's I blame you. But this time yo're barkin' the wrong tree. I ain't seen or heard of that chestnut since I last made talk in yore camp."

"You're a deserter—and you admit you borrowed that cavalry nag without permission," said Danny grimly. "A man that'll steal one horse will steal another. . . ."

"Yeah, but you overlooked one thing." Bible Joe jerked a stubby thumb at his tall cavalry-branded mount. "What color hoss 'ud you say that was?"

"Bay. But . . ."

"Well, when I steals hosses, I only steals bay hosses." The old-timer chuckled behind his mustaches. "But *you've* had a hoss stole an' *I've* had a hoss stole. Reckon we might do wuss than pitch in together. We might find both them stole hosses right in the same herd. That is, if

yo're willin' to believe I didn't have nothin' to do with stealin' yore chestnut—?"

Danny looked into the old blue eyes, now meeting his squarely. In spite of himself and the feeling of mystery that seemed to surround this amazing old cavalry deserter, he nodded his head.

"I'll chuck in with you 'till I know better."

"Then jest plunk yore bed roll alongside my campfire. Nobody 'ull get that roan away, I'll guarantee—not out from under the Hawk's eyes."

BUT to Danny's surprise, instead of heading for the horses, he led the way past where the bandaged stableman held the Eagle horses close-herded.

"No use looking there," said Danny. "The chestnut ain't there."

"No, but there's a bay hoss there."

At the near side of the little herd, confined inside reatas stretched from trees to the water's edge, was indeed the bay that Danny was sure he had seen in Eagle. And beyond it was the claybank. The bay lifted its head with a snort as they approached.

Bible Joe had drawn out of his pocket a short chain, like the broken bit of a trace chain. He held it in his hand, jingling it aimlessly. The bay horse inside the rope stared at them for a moment, big-eyed, then moved away to its grazing.

"Not horse," said the Hawk, gutturally. "Bay—but him not horse."

"Reckon not. That 'ull be the bay Hagan won all them races with." Bible Joe pocketed the chain. "But I had to see."

Danny's eyes were stern. "If Hagan tries any tricks on these Cheyennes and Crows it 'ull be bad. Bad. They won't stand for it. Winchesters or no Winchester. And there's hundreds of young bucks here."

Bible Joe grunted. "Custer had plenty of rifles, too—but it didn't get him nowheres. And there's plenty of these Injuns that was at the Little Big Horn, an' remembers."

He paused. Sam, the stableman, was striding over, his face snarling.

"Get away from them hosses! We ain't runnin' no risk of strangers tamperin' with 'em before the races."

"Wasn't botherin' 'em none, Mister. Jest lookin' em over to figger my bets." Bible Joe nodded meekly, turned to Danny. We'll go see about pitchin' them bedrolls now, Texas."

CHAPTER III

Hoof-Thunder!

BIBLE JOE'S camp was up the creek, almost surrounded by Indian teepees. Danny hesitated about staking his roan out. Bible Joe snorted.

"Hawk is Cheyenne. These teepees all around is Cheyenne. The Cheyennes 'ull steal from the Crows an' the Crows 'ull steal from the Cheyennes. But the Cheyennes won't steal any hoss from the Hawk here." Bible Joe's eyes were puzzled. "Seems like you set a powerful store by jest an ornery hammerhead roan. Now I c'n unnerstan' about that chestnut hoss—"

Danny's lips curled slightly. "That's the way the gang in Eagle figured, too. That's their mistake. I never said the chestnut was a racehoss— It's the roan that's my runnin' hoss."

"Huh?" Bible Joe stared. "You mean that ugly hammerhead is yore runnin' hoss—an' the chestnut was jest cowpony?"

"That's right. The roan don't look much, but he's twice as fast in a quarter as the chestnut. And his ornery looks don't hurt none in gettin' odds when he races."

Bible Joe suddenly slapped his legs in glee. "Hagan—he fell into the pit

he digged hisself! But you wanta keep the roan under kiver till the third or fourth day. That 'ull be when the big bets is made—when they git to matchin' the winners outa the first three-four days' racin'."

IT WAS as the old-timer had said. The first three days were mostly pony races—untried horses matched against each other by the younger bucks, with comparatively small wagers riding on them.

The track was a quarter-mile straightaway, paced out down the middle of the meadow, and the start and finish suitably marked. The young bucks raced down this, stripped to breech-clout and riding bare except for Indian bridle and a single buckskin rope around the ponies' flanks for their heels.

The white agency trader acted as stakeholder at the finish, holding the wagered money or ponies. The starter was the red-headed horse-buyer.

Much to Danny's and Bible Joe's surprise, though, Hondo entered his bay on the third day, in a match race with a young Crow chief who lost a matter of thirty horses as the bay came in first by a head.

But the Crow's pony had been good. Danny knew that the pock-marked little white rider had to let out the bay for all he was worth to win.

"If I can get Hondo into a race—I'm going to match the roan against him," he said shortly to Bible Joe as they sat around the evening fire. "The bay is good—but the roan is better."

"How much you going to bet?"

"All I've got—about fifteen hundred dollars."

"Give it to me, and I'll bunch it with the couple thousand I got," offered Bible Joe. "Outsider c'n always get better odds than the man what owns the hoss. I'll push around and git the best odds I can."

Danny hesitated, then unrolled his blankets and handed the gold pieces to the old cavalryman. It was his life's savings—yet he still remembered that night in Eagle, when the Sharps had poked its barrel over the window sill.

THE next morning, however, the Hawk slipped into camp and spoke in low gutturals with Bible Joe. The blue-eyed old timer abruptly turned to Danny.

"Come sundown, we're either goin' to be rollin' in wealth—or stripped to our breech-clouts. Today's goin' to be the big day. The Hawk says Many Coups just come into camp."

"Many Coups?" Danny looked questioningly.

"Many Coups, the big Cheyenne chief," said Bible Joe. "Richest Injun in the hills—ponies by the hundreds. When he races, the bettin' 'ull be high."

Danny remembered the Indian chiefs he had seen—old men, wrinkled, in the autumn of life. "But the rules say each horse must be ridden by its own owner."

Bible Joe grinned. "Don't git no wrong idees. Many Coups 'ull ride his own hoss, an' ride 'im plenty. He wasn't more'n twenty when I raced him last, an' I shore had my work cut out to stay ahead."

"You've raced him before?"

"Well-l, if you wanta call it a race. Hist'ry, I unner'stands, calls it the Battle o' the Little Big Horn. Me an' Reno an' some others beat the Cheyennes to the bluffs—but the rest of the Seventh that didn't are still down there yet." He waved a freckled hand toward the distant southwest. "Many Coups—that was how he got his war name. Yeah, you c'n just bet that Many Coups is plenty warrior."

He was saddling the branded cavalry mount. "Better look that roan over. He's goin' to have plenty competishun."

AS THEY rode out to the flat, the early gathering of the crowd was already proof that the time of the big race had come. Danny saw Hagan and Hondo with the bay, surrounded by the little groups of whites, evidently all betting on Hondo's horse. A keen-eyed, Crow brave was putting an Indian bridle on a sleek black that looked as steel-muscled as its rider. Then Danny's eye caught a magnificent horse as impressive as the Cheyenne who bestrode it.

It was a pinto, bigger than any Indian pony Danny had ever seen. In fact, Danny had an idea that the magnificent animal had probably been raided from some white man's ranch in the horse country. Short-barreled, but with terrific shoulders and hind-quarters, it looked like a giant bullet inside polished horse-hide.

The Cheyenne rider was a warrior of thirty, bronzed as saddle-leather, with piercing eyes as black as coals. Danny did not need the sight of the eagle feathers in his raven scalplock to tell him that this was the chief, Many Coups.

Bible Joe pulled rein alongside the pinto.

"How, Chief," he greeted amicably. "Many moons come and gone since I see you at Ft. Keogh."

The Cheyenne's face was a copper mask, but his eyes gleamed. "How—Old One of the Horse-Soldiers."

"The pinto is a fit war horse for Many Coups," said Bible Joe. "It is a good thing for me you didn't have him that fight-day by the Little Big Horn."

The Cheyenne's black eyes seemed barely to twinkle. "Long Knife want um 'nother race like that one, maybe?"

"Nope, I'm satisfied," Bible Joe chuckled. "This sort of race is plenty nowadays for an old man like me. Racin' today, Chief?"

"By moonrise Many Coups will have many Crow ponies," answered the Cheyenne, looking toward the Crow teepees.

Suddenly a loud voice broke in from behind Danny.

"Haven't got any ponies to bet—but I got some white man's gold. I'll bet that against yore Cheyenne ponies, Chief—as many as you want to bet."

It was Hagan's rumbling voice. He had come up with Hondo on the bay.

The Cheyenne chief looked at him with unblinking eyes. "When Many Coups was young buck, no bet um against paleface horse. Fight—take paleface horse. Now—" His face became somber—"no good. Too many Long Knives. How much you bet?"

"Five hunderd gold eagles against one hundred ponies—the pick of yore herd."

Many Coups' eyes roamed to Hondo's mount. "You bet on bay horse?"

"On the bay against the pinto," agreed Hagan. "The stakeholder gives you the money if you win—I take my pick of one hundred ponies if the bay wins."

"Him bet." The Cheyenne made a gesture of assent.

Danny heard a clinking sound. Bible Joe was playing with his piece of trace chain, running it through his fingers, letting it fall into the palm of his hand. Hondo swore and jerked viciously at his reins as the bay moved nervously.

Hagan was looking at Danny. "Ever find anything of that missing chestnut?"

"No hide nor hair," said Danny grimly.

"Too bad," Hagan shook his head sympathetically, "to lose yore runnin' hoss after comin' all the way to Lodgepole."

"I'm racin' this roan."

"Huh?" Hagan stared, amazed. "Don't wanta put up any bets on

that roan against Hondo's bay, do you?"

But it was Bible Joe who broke in. "Danny's doin' the ridin'. I'm doin' the bettin'. That bay hoss is too fast —I seen 'im yestiddy. But you an' me might talk about it a leetle—"

At that moment the horse buyer's shout arose, calling the entrants to the starting line with their mounts. The riders headed down the flat.

DANNY found himself stirrup to stirrup with Hondo on the bay. On his other side, to his right, was Many Coups, glued to the giant pinto. Beyond Hondo the Crow rider held his snorting, half-broken black to the line.

Ahead, at the finish line, the agent and judge stood, with the whites clustered around. Along the line of the course the Crow and Cheyenne braves strung out, the squaws and boys in the rear.

The horse buyer held his hat high, looked along the line. Suddenly with a shout, he brought it down—the starting signal.

Danny heard the snort of the pinto as the horse was drummed by the Cheyenne's heels—heard the shrill yell of the Crow, and Hondo's curse. But at the same moment the roan between his own knees had shot forward like a bolt under the prick of his spurs. The beat of plunging hoofs was like rolling thunder.

Neck and neck the horses had broken from the line, the Crow's perhaps a nose ahead. But inside the first hundred yards, the pinto and the black were even, nose for nose. Hondo's bay had dropped back almost to Danny's stirrups, a neck behind.

Saddleless, their bridles but a twisted strip of deerhide, with another wider strip for the red riders to secure heelhold, the Indians' horses had the advantage of thirty pounds weight. But the white men's horses, larger, grain-fed through the hard winters, had more sinew to call upon. Imperceptibly they began to creep up.

Bending forward in his saddle, almost on the roan's neck, Danny rode effortlessly. The rush of air was in his ears, the coppery Indians lining the track a dark blur. Beneath him he could feel the surge and thrust of the roan's mighty muscles uncoiling like springs.

The roan was passing the black—was pulling up even with the pinto. Danny could see the rise and fall of a coppery arm, as the Cheyenne chief lashed his pony on. Behind him he could hear Hondo's sudden curse.

Then the roan was ahead—an inch —a foot—two feet. Not a hundred feet in front now, the finish line showed. Yells sounded in his ears—Hagan's bull-like roar—old Bible Joe's high-pitched voice.

Danny was aware, then, of the cause of the added excitement. The bay—Hondo's bay—was moving up on him—was almost abreast of him! The bay's nostrils were a welter of foam, his flanks were bloody from the raking spurs. The little pock-marked man was riding brutally, cruelly, with quirt and spurs.

And the bay was drawing ahead! That was the incredible fact. The bay that Danny had seen pressed to beat the Crow's pony the day before —the bay he was sure could never throw dust on his roan—was drawing ahead!

For the first time Danny really let the roan feel the spurs—felt its answering leap as it flashed to the front.

Then in that moment when the knowledge of victory was thrilling Danny's veins, Hondo suddenly cursed, swung his quirt. It bit, not into the bay, but into Danny's roan, fairly across the roan's muzzle. The roan, mighty horse that he was, broke stride under that unexpected slash —he faltered, then picked up stride again.

But too late. Pistol shots shattered the air—wild yells of triumph from the clustered whites around Hagan. As the finish line flashed beneath, Danny eased up, allowed the hurtling roan to slow, drawing great gasps of air into its tortured lungs—a beaten horse by a nose.

WHEN he checked and turned, Danny's face was white hot, his lips a thin, grim line. Hondo was off the victorious bay, surrounded by the whites. His pocked face was a grin of triumph as they patted him on the back and shoulders.

Bible Joe, standing there at the finish, saw the look on Danny's face as he dismounted, left the roan's reins trailing. He stepped to intervene. Then as Danny shouldered rudely past, he fell in behind, his freckled hand going to the butt of the Colt peacemaker at his hip.

Hondo turned at their approach, a snarl of triumph on his lips.

"Thought yore crowbait would have a chance in a *real* hoss-race, huh?" he taunted. "Let it be a lesson—"

The rest of his words were chopped off. Chopped off by the crackling lash of Danny's quirt, slashing up and across his pocked face and sneering lips.

"That's in exchange for that slash you gave my horse," Danny said viciously. "Now go for your gun and we'll finish the rest of it!"

Hondo stumbled back. His hand started for the gun in his holster, and then stopped. His eyes glared like a trapped animal's.

A growling murmur rose from the other whites. They closed in, glances fierce.

The white agent and judge pushed forward hastily. "Here—here, what's the trouble?"

"Nothing—except that the bay won on a foul," snapped Danny. "This man here lashed my roan—made it break stride—made it lose unfairly."

"Yo're damn right," affirmed Bible Joe. "I seen it."

The Crows and Cheyennes were closing in now, at first curiously, then with ominously flashing eyes.

Hondo's hunted eyes rolled around desperately. "It's a lie—I didn't—!"

Many Coups' magnificent bronzed body came thrusting through the circle. His hand was on the hilt of his keen hunting knife. Behind him other Cheyennes crowded close.

"Um Paleface trick?" said Many Coups fiercely. "Cheyenne not give up ponies. Cheyenne take paleface ponies—make many coups—"

The little band of whites from Eagle bunched together into a tight knot. Guns were out.

Suddenly, Danny Carr dropped his hand from his gun.

"I—I reckon it was a mistake. The horses were close together—Hondo might have whipped his quirt back too far."

"Huh?" Bible Joe's voice was incredulous. "You ain't goin' to let 'im get away with that? I'll back ye! Hell, I seen him swing that quirt—"

"No, it was an accident." Danny Carr turned away. "The bay wins—"

He pushed his way toward the roan, still standing ground-hitched. As he swung into the saddle he could hear the red-headed buyer's voice already offering bids:

"I hear you Eagle folks won plenty ponies, Hagan. I'll give you thirty dollars a head, sight unseen. . . ."

And Hagan's answering snort: "Not much. We'll drive 'em to Bozeman ourselves an' get forty—"

Bible Joe, Danny noticed, was making excited talk in the native Cheyenne with the crestfallen Crow warrior.

But Danny wasn't interested in Injun *habla* then. He was more interested in Hagan's answer to the red-headed buyer's bids, and the beginning of a plan.

CHAPTER IV
Fire and Thunder!

DANNY CARR was rolling his blankets and slicker when Bible Joe returned. The Hawk was with him.

Bible Joe was staring at the roan dazedly.

"Seein' is believin' but I don't believe it yet. I didn't believe that roan or any other hoss—" He shook his head again. "But why'd you let Pock-Face git away with it, Danny? He had to lean 'way out to slash yore hoss—I seen him, deliberate—"

"It wouldn't have just been Hondo—it would have been a massacre," Danny spoke tersely. "Those Cheyennes were mad—shooting once started wouldn't have stopped. The Cheyennes would have wiped out all the other whites along with Hagan's bunch—then the troops would have had to come in, and there'd be hundreds killed, white and red, before it was finished. It wasn't worth it."

"Huh?" Bible Joe suddenly swore. "An' me in the cavalry fifteen years! Durn me for a blind old man. But where you ridin'?"

Danny threw the saddle on the roan. "To meet Hagan and Hondo somewhere off the reservation—an' when they ain't expectin' it. If they'd win a race that way, they'd steal a horse like the chestnut to keep him out of the race. And I won't have Hagan riding that chestnut." He began to lash his slicker roll behind the saddle. "As soon as I can swap a Colt for a pony, the roan is yours—to part make up for the money you lost on him."

"Who lost what money?"

"Didn't you bet—?"

"Shore I bet. But I bet with that Crow—bet him the roan could beat his black." With twinkling eyes Bible Joe was unrolling the oat sack he carried. From it he dumped under Danny's staring eyes a cascade of bills and goldpieces. "Here's the money I bet, and what we won. The Crow bet ponies, but I sold 'em flat to that horse-buyer at thirty dollars a head. Half of it's yores."

Danny Carr blinked unbelievingly. "You bet with the Crow—and not Hagan?"

"Shore I did." Bible Joe's voice was querulous. "I didn't think there was a hoss west o' the Mississip' could beat old Apache—not even with Hondo ridin' him. Why I knowed that bay was Cap'n Corrigan's race hoss the minute he turned to that jinglin' chain. He thought it was the Cap'n's sword chain he heered jinglin', he's heered it around the Fort stables so long."

Comprehension came slowly to Danny. "You mean that bay was not Hondo's—that he was the stolen bay you've been looking for?"

"You just heered me say so, didn't ye?" demanded Bible Joe indignantly. "Hondo's bay didn't pay no 'tention to that jinglin' chain, 'member? This 'un did. Hondo and Hagan shore pulled a slick 'un over them Injuns—racin' their own hoss the day before, an' then usin Apache for a ringer in the big race. But the Cap'n 'ud shore bust a b'iler if he'd seen the ride Hondo give his prize race-hoss that he'd brung all the way from Kaintuck to Fort Keough."

Danny Carr ignored the money on the grass. He pulled out his Colt, twirled the cylinder to see that every chamber was loaded, then mounted.

"Hey, wait a minute," Bible Joe began hurriedly stuffing the money back into the sack. "I'm comin' with you. They ain't goin' to spade-bit that Apache hoss, either—even if he does belong to that Black Irisher from County Cork . . . Hawk, git them hosses up here! You want 'em hoss-thieves to git clean away with the Cap'n's dress peerade charger?"

LIKE a pool of ink the grassy flat lay between the circling hills; hills that crested against the star-studded sky, piled one on the other, a hundred miles away to the Lodge Pole.

Only three flickering dots of red broke all that black inky flat. Yet, by those three dots, Danny and Bible Joe, shivering in their saddles in the before-dawn chill, knew and were satisfied. This inky hollow was the Yellowstone trail, only route to the Montana towns. And those red dots were the low campfires of the men of Eagle. There some men slept while others, nighthawks for the herd, ceaselessly circled the hundreds of ponies grazing hungrily through the few hours of the halt.

"Twelve—fifteen men, 'sides Hondo and Hagan." Bible Joe kneed close to Danny. "That'll mean four-five at the herd, rest of 'em asleep at the fire. They won't be expectin' us after almost a week. We'll smite 'em like Sampson smote th' Fillysteens."

"The Hawk's ready?"

"He'll hit the camp cavvy, soon as we start the noise at the main herd. Too bad Hagan an' Hondo kept Apache an' yore Brownie hoss in with the night string. We could a' made it all in one sweep."

"Can't expect everything. If we have any luck, come daylight, we'll have all them ponies up that draw an' scattered so deep in the brush they'll take a week's huntin'. If we can't pick up our own Apache and Brownie in a week, we don't deserve 'em."

"Mebbe," said Bible Joe dubiously. "If Many Coups don't butt in none."

"Many Coups?"

"Shore." Bible Joe spat and looked toward the loping hilltops toward the southeast and Lodge Pole. "That old war-whoop ain't quit all his habits jest 'cause he draws a ration now an' then at the reservation. Not with him feelin' these ponies was stole from him by a paleface trick. I'd feel a lot healthier if I knowed where him an' his Cheyennes was, right now."

"We haven't seen any signs of them."

"No—an' we never seen no signs on the Little Big Horn that time, either—not till we run square into five thousand whoopin' bucks. Many Coups could hide a thousand Cheyennes up in them hills, an' even the birds wouldn't know it."

He spat again, shrugged his shoulders. "Well, a man's years below is few an' full of trouble. An' he can't duck his trouble when it's due. That's Bible. Do we git started?"

For answer Danny unrolled his slicker, eased the Colt in his holster. As the two of them rode onto the flat, the first gray fingers of the coming dawn were beginning to erase the stars in the eastern sky.

BUT behind them was still the inky curtain of night. Unseen themselves, they picked up the dull blotch of the grazing herd, the muffled trample of restless hoofs. Close ahead a man's voice came, low pitched yet clear. A match flared and then died into a glowing spark that was a lighted cigarette end. Hagan's nighthawks.

Suddenly that glowing cigarette spark flashed in a falling arc, died as it struck the ground. The night guard gave a startled oath, rising to a shout of alarm. "Hey—who's that? . . . Hagan! Call Hagan!"

But simultaneously with the hurled cigarette, Danny and Bible Joe had sunk their spurs, shaken out their slickers. Their voices rose in shrill yelps, followed by the crash of pistol shots as their forty-fives spouted fire and thunder in the dawn.

For one brief instant the herd ponies stood, frozen, with lifted heads. Then with snorts of fear and thundering hoofs they whirled and stampeded ahead of those fearsome,

charging twin demons of fire and noise.

The nighthawks' oaths and the crackle of their shots were drowned out. Over to the side, from the camp, waking men shouted in surprise.

Spurring at the heels of the flying herd, Danny all but rode over a startled nighthawk on a plunging horse. The guard cursed, threw a hurried shot at the sudden apparition. Danny's forty-five threw its shot ahead instead of into the air, and the nighthawk doubled oddly over his saddlehorn before losing balance and plunging on to the ground.

To his left Danny could hear Bible Joe shooting and bellowing. Then another commotion broke out in the direction of the camp—thrashing hoofs, yells, the shrill war whoops of the Hawk.

By now the main pony herd had burst shell-like through the thin ring of the scattered guards, were surging up the hollow straight toward the mouth of the draw, as Danny had figured. Spreading out, Danny and Bible Joe pinched in the fringes of the would-be stragglers, and sent the whole stampede up and into the steep-sided draw. Left behind, the outwitted nighthawks, still scattered and puzzled by the raid and stampede, were just beginning to cluster for a prudent council before taking up the pursuit.

Bible Joe drew alongside, reloading and chuckling as he rode.

"Even old Roman Nose or Chief Gall hisself couldn't of done any better. Got their whole herd bottled up here ahead—"

"All but the two we 'specially want. Unless the Hawk got 'em."

"Well here he comes. He can speak for hisself."

But the Hawk's broken gutturals, when he came up, were forecast by his shaking head.

"No gettum. Paleface keepum good horse staked in camp. Hawk gettum one paleface—but no gettum horse."

"Then we're ridin' too fast. Pull up," said Danny, setting the action to the word.

Bible Joe gave a yelp. "What's the idee? Them nighthawks' hosses is tired, ours is fresh. If we keep pound-in' these ponies' tails, we'll be outa sight up that side gully 'fore they come in sight. They'll never spot us turning off, outa all these tracks."

"That's exactly what I'm thinkin'. Slow down."

By now the coming day had swept away the last blotch of ink in the hollow. Against that gray the dots of the fresh-mounted men from the wakened camp were buglike as they rode toward the draw, angling in ahead of the slower nightguards. And even that fresh group broke into two, as four better mounted men drew ahead of all the rest.

"That," said Danny quietly, "is what I was waiting for. We can ride now—but slow."

"Yeah—we waited just long enough to get our tails in a loop," Bible Joe said grumblingly as he put his horse into motion. "With them behind, an' Many Coups mebbe ahead, we'll be pinched tighter'n a—"

He jerked his mount to its haunches, held up his hand. From ahead, far up the main draw where the stampeding ponies had vanished, had come suddenly a medley of distant whoops. Not like the Hawk's, but shriller—the triumphant yelping chorus of Cheyenne braves.

"That's him—Many Coups. He's got them ponies now. And he'll be yelpin' the scalp yell when he gets on down to us—"

But Danny had pulled up too, swung the hammerheaded roan into the brush of the slope. "Far enough. We're almost to that gully, anyway."

SILENCE, as deep as it was sudden, had fallen over the hills and the draw now.

Then, down the draw, out of sight where it turned and weaved around the spurs, came the pound of hoofs, the ringing click as steel shoes thudded on freshet-loosened stones. Voices—an oath—and around the bend in the draw rode four white men, Hagan and Hondo in the lead.

"That's what I was waiting for. I knew they'd draw ahead with their better horses." Danny was balancing his Colt in his hand, his fingers twirling the cylinder.

"Why damn that Hondo! He's ridin' Apache—an' he's raked his ribs raw with his spurs!" Bible Joe swore in his whiskers, suddenly jerked free his long-barreled Sharps. "I'll blast his teeth through the back o' his hat!"

But Danny had already spurred his horse out into the open. His eyes were on Hagan, a pace in the lead on the chestnut horse, but his voice when he called was as cool as dew.

"This way, Hagan—if you're looking for us."

Bull Hagan jerked in his saddle as if he were shot. His glance darted sideways, his left hand yanked instinctively on his reins. Then his right hand with the heavy Colt flashed out and up, at the same time that Hondo, close behind, gave a startled glance and spurred his horse half sideways and around.

The two shots came almost together. Danny's hat leaped and spun in the air, but Hagan jerked and half-turned in the saddle as though pounded by some mighty sledge. Then his raised gun was vomiting fire and smoke again, as Hondo's first shot came crashing and the two men in the rear hurriedly thumbed their guns.

In an instant the whole bottom of the little draw was a fog of gunsmoke and thunder, echoing and re-echoing with the crashing reports, the trampling of hoofs, the oaths and groans of fighting men.

But Danny had eyes only for that one face ahead there in the smoke—Hagan's face contorted with pain and rage, twisted with the shock of body-blasting lead and the effort of leveling and firing a forty-five that had suddenly become a dragging weight in his hands.

Danny himself was half-blinded with blood that dripped from a slash above his right eye. One shoulder was numb and his eyes, nostrils and throat were stinging with the acrid fumes of burning powder. His gun was leaping and kicking in his hand—

And then he was conscious that the red, twisted face was no longer there. It was bowed on Hagan's chest. Hagan's gun was gone from his hand which was now clenched desperately around his saddle horn as his great body weaved and shook in the saddle. Then with one last convulsive jerk, Hagan was out of the saddle and plunging to the ground, his left hand still twisted in the loop of the reins while the frightened chestnut reared and kicked to be free from that frightful thing that it knew, even in its horse-way, was already dead.

Hondo was down on the other side of the draw, too, the Hawk already racing to catch the bay's dragging reins as it crow-hopped to fight clear. A riderless claybank was fouled in a scrub-oak, and thudding hoofs down the draw told of the disappearance of the last survivor from Eagle.

"Told that Pock-face I'd blast his teeth through his hat!" Bible Joe's voice bellowed with triumph. Then it suddenly changed to anxiety. "Danny — Danny! You hit — you hurt—?"

Danny was fumbling with fresh cartridges from his belt as he tried to reload. "A scrape on the head, and a bullet in the shoulder. But—" he lifted his left hand, wriggled the fingers—"no bones broke. It'll be all right."

"Then let's get the hell outa here,

before that Eagle fella gets back with the rest of them hoss-thieves." Bible Joe's voice was hurried. "That is, if Many Coups don't beat 'em to it—"

ONLY a full half hour later, and when they were a mile up the gully and away from the draw, did Bible Joe draw rein. Then Danny, the blinding blood at last wiped clear of his eyes, saw that not only did Bible Joe have the bay horse, Apache, on the lead, but that the Hawk had brought along the chestnut and the claybank as well.

"I reckon this 'ull do." Bible Joe swung down, left his mount ground-tied by the dragging reins. "Now let's git at that shoulder of yours."

But when he had wiped away the blood, he grunted with satisfaction. "Clean hole—the lead went right on through. Tobacco 'ull keep the pizen out, an' you'll never know it inside a month."

The sting of the chewed tobacco on the raw wound brought tears to Danny's eyes, but the feel of the bandaging bandanna was good. The Hawk had been moving around among the horses, and now to Danny's surprise he saw that Bible Joe's saddle had been shifted to the claybank. Bible Joe jerked Hondo's saddle from the bay, patted its muzzle and then reached up to part the mane behind the ears.

"Cap'n Corrigan didn't want to sp'ile his looks with a reg-lar brand. Jest a little 'C' up here under his mane—see? That's what I was lookin' for that night when yore dam' roan nigh kicked my brains out."

Danny looked around. "But the claybank . . . Why—?"

"Sp'iles o' war." Bible Joe tossed the reins of Apache and his own recent mount to the Hawk, and chuckled. "Here, Hawk. When you take old Apache an' this other Army nag here back to Cap'n Corrigan at Fort Keough you tell 'im I sent 'em. An' remind 'im I said he couldn't make no reg'lar troopers do no fool postin' in the saddle like New York dudes."

Danny stared in amazement. "You're not keeping Apache?"

"Certain not. That 'ud be stealin'. An' I ain't no hoss-thief."

"But I thought—"

"You thought I was a deserter, too. I ain't. My last enlistment hitch run out the mornin' I left the Fort. I got my discharge papers right here with me. But I ain't re-enlistin'—fifteen years soldierin' is enough for any man."

"You—you came after Corrigan's horse *after* your enlistment was up?" Danny's voice was incredulous.

"Shore. Apache was stole the last night I had stable duty. Unfinished business— I couldn't leave my Army record with no black mark like that ag'in it. I had to get him back."

"But for a man you didn't like—a man you said you hated—"

"Didn't nuther. I said he was a trial an' a tribulation. Any officer that tries to make troopers ride like city dudes is a trial an' a tribulation. Besides, Cap'n Corrigan is from County Cork, an' I was born in Killybannion." Sergeant Moore's eyes beamed contentedly as he watched the Hawk tighten the leads on the two cavalry mounts. "Best damn Injun scout an' tracker in the Army. He'll be in Fort Keough forty-eight hours after he leaves us at the head o' these hills."

"If that bunch from Eagle don't figure out we turned up this gully, and come along after us, you mean," said Danny, looking back.

"If they'd been that smart, they'd been here already." Bible Joe shook his head. Then he suddenly let out a chuckle. "I was just thinkin' how surprised them Eagle fellas is goin' to be when they ride up on that draw—an' run acrost Many Coups instead o' us an' them ponies!"

The Cactus City Gazette
BRONCO BLYNN, EDITOR
VOL. 25 No. 75

NO LOSS

Rusty Tells The Truth

THE buckaroos at the Six Point Shooting Star and Crescent Dude Ranch have got instructions to be always polite and truthful to the guests. But Rusty Russel was sure hard put to do same when he took that bunch of dudes on a trip through the high country.

There was one timid old female among the bunch who always was moaning and arguing and generally causing more commotion than an uninvited skunk at a picnic. When the party reached the ford in the Roaring River, this old fussbudget took one look at the swirling water and the treacherous footing and started moaning about the danger. However, Rusty kept assuring it wasn't dangerous to ford the stream.

"No danger!" she shrieked. "Why, I understand that only last week you lost a person here."

"It's a dang lie!" answered Rusty, careful to be polite and truthful. "If you're talkin' about that one that drowned to death on the last trip, why you're loco! We found the corpse right very next day, so you can't rightfully say we lost him."

MISSING!

SINCE Judge Joker Jameson did away with that box of sand in his courtroom, none of the tobacco-chewing citizens has been able to enjoy court proceedings at all, because they felt plumb lonesome without a cud in their face. So yesterday a bunch of them went to the Judge and petitioned that he replace the sand box, as they sure missed it.

"That's just the trouble!" barked the Judge. "If you hadn't missed it before, you wouldn't be missin' it now!"

ELECTION RETURNS

Results Still Uncertain

IT was very unthoughtful of Sheriff Rimfire Renfro to get in the way of a .45 slug, because it put folks to the inconvenience of having to hold a election. And electing a sheriff causes a lot of wear and tear on everybody; at least half the population is laid up with lung trouble from smoking the candidates' cigars. And the other half has got writer's cramp from voting so much.

Besides them damages, there is the suspense of waiting for the results. Ordinarily we know who gets the job right away, but when them two candidates fought it out yesterday, neither of them got a definite victory, as they are both still alive, though ventilated.

However, maybe today one of them will kick the bucket and decide the issue. But if they both live, then I guess we'll just have to count the votes.

A hell of a election, if you ask me!

PRETTY SOFT

Corpse Comforted

DAN SAWYER has done some very funny jobs of undertaking in his time, but the queerest order he ever got was when he was undertaking the mortal remains of Stinger Stinson. The widow insisted that the casket be padded with a soft mattress.

Naturally, Dan politely asked what in hell that was for, to which the widow replied, "Well, Stinger had rheumatiz, you know, and he never could be comfortable in a hard bed."

(Hell's Fire, if the widow wanted to make Stinger comfortable in the Hereafter, she should have had him planted on a cake of ice with a palm leaf fan in each hand!)

HUMAN CALENDAR

Mrs. Douglas Deceived

THE Ladies' Sociable Society almost didn't have their regular weekly meeting last Saturday night. When the Ladies got all assembled they found out their president, Mrs. Douglas was missing, and of course they couldn't have a meeting without a president. So Mrs. Seton sashayed over to the Douglas's to ask Mrs. Douglas what the hell was the matter.

"But this is only Friday," claimed Mrs. Douglas. "The meeting is tomorrow night."

"You're loco!" Mrs. Seton argued politely. "Tonight is Saturday."

"But it *can't* be!" came back Mrs. D. "Because my husband is cold sober."

CITIZEN SICK

Sawbones Has To Search For Symptoms

IT would seem like Doc Donnelly would have had an easy time diagnosing what was wrong with Patches Patterson when he took sick the other day.

Patches already has lost an appendix, a couple of tonsils, and a very nice set of gall stones, and by the time he detached his wooden leg, his glass eye, his steel hook which he uses for a left hand, and his toupee, there wasn't a hell of a lot of him left for the Doc to examine.

But even so, Doc had a hard time figuring out the right malady for him, but finally after taking Patches' pulse, his temperature, and a shot of his best whiskey, Doc figured Patches must have the Ager, so he asked him did his teeth chatter any.

"By gosh, I don't know," answered Patches. "Maybe you better look an' see for yorself. You'll find my teeth layin' up on that shelf there."

NOTICE TO SHEEPHERDERS

CITIZENS, I want to apologize to that young Dude who came into my shop the other day looking for a job.

I'll admit he was very pleasant about it but he wasn't very tactful.

"Beefsteak," he addresses me, "I'm looking for a job here in the cow country and I wonder if I could work for you?"

"Wal, now, son," I says, "just what can you do?"

"Well, I ain't had any practical experience, but I graduated from college."

"How do I know you graduated from college?" I comes back at him, smart like, and then asked him to say a big word to me so's I'll know he really did graduate from college.

"Phyllomorphosis," he comes back quick like.

"Wal, now," I says judicious like, "that's pretty good, but I need something more than that."

"I have my sheepskin," he says suddenly, and that's when I went into action. By the holy saints, when these colleges begin teaching sheepherding and then send their young buckeroos out here to horn in on cattle-raising—Wal, that's too much.

I up with my Greener and fill that young one with buckshot, and I don't find until too late that the lad really didn't mean anything by it because what he was referring to was a diploma, so I'm mighty sorry. That was just another high fallutin' word—that's all!

Yours resp.
Beefsteak Stevens
Proprietor of the
Cactus City Meat Shoppe

EXAGGERATION!

Original Rumor Wrong

THERE is a rumor going around that Cincha Sinclair got shot all to hell in that gunfight last Thursday. Well, it is true that Cincha stopped eleven slugs, but only one of his wounds was fatal, so it wasn't such a hell of a battle after all.

EDITORIAL

A FEMALE cow is a mighty cantankerous critter, but the ornriest, meanest cow on the range is downright gentle alongside the female citizens of this town. Cactus City Ladies always is bellering and bellyaching for something or other, and then when it is gave to them, danged if they ain't dissatisfied with it.

Take this tree business, for instance. When the Ladies pointed out that Cactus City didn't have a single tree, like other Prosperous and Up To Date cities, why right away the menfolks saw the point. They went up into the high country and brought down a oak tree, a tall straight one with stout branches which was planted good and solid right alongside the Studhorse Bar. All hands agreed that it was a great Civic Improvement, and to celebrate the occasion decided to try it out immediately.

Very fortunately for the occasion, a sheepherder was found who had come into town for grub. And after rounding him up, the boys got him all ready for the honor of trying out the tree.

But just when things was all set for the tryout, danged if some Ladies didn't appear and start screeching and screaming at the tops of their voices. When they was calmed down enough to talk sense, or as near sense as they can talk, they completely dumfounded all hands by declaring that the menfolks had misunderstood and had planted the wrong kind of a tree.

It turned out that what the Ladies wanted was a live tree for *shade* purposes, not a stout dead oak for *hanging* purposes.

Hell's Fire! When them females agitate any Civic Improvement in this town they always want something which is Pretty instead of something Useful.

NOTICE!!

IF any of you citizens happen to have a "WANTED —REWARD" notice about Poison Peters, the outlaw, I wish you'd give same to me.

Yeah, I know that Peters

(*Continued next column*)

TOO DANG DUDISH

Coddled Cayuses Get Modern Conveniences

BY this time, everybody is kind of used to the finicky coddling way that Algy Twombley-Twombley treats them English Jumper Horses of his. But even so, folks was surprised when there arrived at the railroad depot a white porcelain watering trough, which was shipped to Algy from Chicago. In fact, folks thought Algy was carrying things too far.

However, when Algy arrived in town, he explained that white porcelain thing wasn't a watering trough at all. It is a bath tub—the first one ever seen in Cactus City.

The explanation sort of stopped most people's criticism, but I still think Algy is putting on airs. Why in hell can't Algy do like everybody else and use a bucket of water and a sponge when he wants to give his horses a bath?

EVEN STEVEN

Stranger Savvies Self Defense

CROSS-CUT KANE, of the Gem Barber Shop and Baths, was very much surprised the other day by a stranger who come into the shop for a shave. Cross-cut had just slapped on the lather and was making a few preliminary flourishes with his razor when suddenly the stranger reached over and selected hisself a razor from Cross-cut's assortment.

"Say, what's the idea?" queried Cross-cut. "You want to shave yoreself?"

"No, I don't want to *shave* myself," answers the stranger. "I just want to *defend* myself."

(Well, maybe he wasn't no stranger after all. Or if he was, he'd been warned.)

already is done captured and strung up, and the reward is paid. But Peters' widow was telling me that she didn't have no picture of her dearly beloved, if deceased, husband, so I thought it would be nice to get one for her.

Bronco Blynn

Tal Brady's hard gaze raked the room.

Boothill's Badge-toter

By Gunnison Steele

Marshal Tal Brady didn't care if folks thought he was yellow—until his brother sent him that owlhoot and elephant challenge

TAL BRADY, Marshal of Latigo, left his office and strode along the dark, shallow gulch toward Curly Jack Slade's cabin. His lean, hawkish features were grim-set. His bootheels thudded harshly against the hard-baked earth. Tal Brady knew he was about to do a foolish thing; he knew that bucking Curly Jack Slade would bring trouble, probably utter ruin and disaster.

But he didn't hesitate or make any secret of his coming. Curly Jack Slade's cabin, up the gulch a quarter-mile from Latigo, was dark, but Tal Brady could see a sliver of light at a blanketed window. He rapped sharply on the door.

Footsteps sounded inside. The door opened a crack, and Curly Jack Slade stood in the opening. Curly Jack Slade was slender, dudishly dressed, with curly yellow hair, cat-like eyes, and a thin yellow mustache curling over thinner lips. Curly Jack smiled suavely, mockingly, when he saw Tal Brady.

"I'm honored, Brady," he said. "Come inside and join us."

Hard-eyed, Tal Brady pushed past him into the room. He paused there while his gaze raked the room. Four men sat around a table, dealing stud poker. Deliberately, Tal Brady's eyes singled them out. Cotton Orde, a squat, towheaded little gent; Tip Scanlon, gaunt, hook-nosed, dull-eyed; Brant Schull, fat, bald, with round, staring little eyes filled with cruelty. These men were Curly Jack Slade's gunnies who were never far

from their chief's side—dangerous, deadly with a sixgun, all of them.

The fourth card player was Dan Brady, Tal Brady's kid brother. Barely eighteen, Dan Brady was lithe, dark, with wild, restless fires burning in his black eyes. Premature lines of dissipation and bitterness were etched in his pale face. A whiskey bottle and tin cups were on the table. Dan Brady, Tal saw, was more than half drunk.

CURLY JACK SLADE closed the door, came to the table. He looked at Tal Brady, with that slight smile still pulling at his thin lips. "Room for just one more hand, Brady," he said softly. "Pull up a chair—unless you're particular who you play with."

"I am, damn particular!" Tal Brady said flatly. He paced to the table, placed a hand on Dan Brady's shoulder. "You 'bout ready to get outa here, kid?" he asked gently.

Dan Brady impatiently shook the hand off. There was a sullen droop to his young lips.

"Hell, Jim, I've got sense enough to take care of myself!" he said angrily. "I don't need no wet nursin'. I was just gettin' lucky, and now you're tryin' to spoil it all."

"Bad luck's all you'll have in this hole," Tal said levelly. "How much have you lost?"

"What difference does that make?" Dan asked fiercely. "In a little while, I'd have it all back, and more too. Anyway, it's my money, ain't it?"

"No," Tal Brady said. "You won't have any money, not 'til you're twenty-one years old. The court appointed me your legal guardian, told me to take care of you and your property, and that's what I'm tryin' to do. Already, if I held you to it, you've gambled away more than your share of the outfit. Can't you see what's happenin', kid? These slick-fingered buzzards're playin' you for a sucker, pickin' you clean. You don't have a chance!"

Curly Jack's laugh was cold, amused. "Them's harsh words, Mister Brady. Maybe," his bleak eyes narrowed slightly, "the kid's showin' more sense than you are. Maybe you'd both be better off if you kept your nose outa his business!"

Tal Brady read the threat in Curly Jack's words, and cold rage surged over him. But he fought down the impulse to have it out with Curly Jack, then and there. He turned back to Dan Brady.

"Get yore hat, kid," he said tersely. "I don't aim to see you made a damn fool of any longer!"

"I won't go!" Dan flared angrily. "Damn it, Tal, you're the one who's tryin' to make a fool outa me. You get out and let me alone—I'll come when I get good and ready, and not before!"

"You'll come now!" Tal Brady said.

He pulled Dan Brady to his feet. The three gunmen at the table watched grinningly, waiting for a sign from Curly Jack Slade. That mocking smile was still on Curly Jack's thin lips. He held a piece of paper in his hand.

"How about this?" he asked.

Tal Brady took the piece of paper and looked at it. It was an I.O.U., for a hundred dollars, and it was signed by Dan Brady. Again that feeling of bitter, helpless anger surged over Tal Brady. But he said nothing. He took out a check book, wrote out a check for a hundred dollars, gave it to Curly Jack. Curly Jack accepted the check with a suave, mock courtesy.

"Now take the yearlin' on home and dry him behind the ears," a sneering voice said.

Tal Brady turned slowly. Derisive grins creased the hard faces of Curly Jack's three gunnies. Cotton Orde sat hunched over the table. Brant Schull was toying with the whiskey bottle.

Tip Scanlon had risen to his feet and stood spread-legged. It was Scanlon who had spoken.

"Did you say somethin', Mister?" Tal Brady asked, very softly.

"Yeah, I said somethin'." The hook-nosed gunman grinned. "You're a sap, Brady—a bigger sap, even, than the kid. Mebby you need somebody to bed you down—permanent!"

Stiff-legged, Tal Brady paced to Scanlon. His fist arced and blasted into Tip Scanlon's face. The blow hurled the gaunt killer back against the wall and to the floor. Tal Brady stepped back, smiling coldly, hand on gun-butt. Tip Scanlon rolled over, swayed to his knees, killer lust stirring in his muddy eyes.

"Why, you two-bit badge-toter . . . !" he spat as his hand snapped downward.

Curly Jack Slade didn't move, but his cold voice was sharp as a whip-lash: "Stop it, Scanlon! I'll settle this in my own way." He said to Tal Brady, "You got what you came after —take him and get out! You'll hear from me later."

"Let's get outa here," Dan Brady said, suddenly sobered by the nearness of death. "I—I'll see you fellows later."

TAL BRADY shrugged. Contemptuously, he turned his back on the snarling gunmen, went with Dan Brady into the night. They were silent as they went down the gulch and along Latigo's quiet street to the marshal's office. But Tal sensed the sullen resentment that held the youngster, and bitterness filled his thoughts. There was so much about this that the kid didn't savvy. The button wasn't bad. Tal told himself, just wild and reckless. Given a chance, he'd come out of it.

Tal Brady made a light, turned to look at Dan. Dan avoided his gaze, dark eyes petulant and resentful and still a little foggy with whiskey. Dan had dropped into a chair, sat twisting nervously in his fingers a gold "luck piece" the size of a dollar that was etched on one side with a picture of a coiled snake. But the coin hadn't brought Dan luck with Curly Jack Slade's tinhorns, and never would.

"I don't mean to be hard, kid," Tal said softly. "I'm just tryin' to do what's best for you. You savvy that, don't you?"

"I savvy yo're treatin' me like I was a thumb-suckin' baby!" Dan burst out impatiently. "What's wrong in playin' a little poker with your friends?"

"They're not your friends! They just want the money they're cheatin' you out of. That, and . . . Tal Brady broke off, forcing back the words that crowded to his lips. He went on, pleadingly, "Don't you see, kid? Slade is hittin' at me, through you. He wants to be boss of the town. He knows that I'd go through hell for you. I can't fight Slade, unless you help me."

"Curly Jack Slade is a big man," Dan Brady said. "You haven't had much luck fightin' him, so far. Looks to me like he gets away with just about what he pleases in this town. If you know he's so crooked, why don't you put him in jail?"

That stumped Tal Brady. He couldn't tell the kid why Curly Jack Slade and his swaggering gunslicks did just about as they pleased in Latigo without going to jail for it. He knew others were wondering about that, too.

"I want you to stay away from Slade," he said. "I want you to promise you won't gamble with him or his card-slicks any more."

"I won't promise anything," Dan denied sullenly. "I'm old enough to take care of myself, and I still own a half interest in the Anchor T."

"I'll give you no more money to throw away," Tal told him sternly. "And I'll pay no more gamblin' debts —so don't make any!"

"There's other ways of gettin' money," Dan Brady said recklessly. He stood up, stalked from the office. . . .

THE next evening marshal Tal Brady sat in his office and stared moodily at Latigo's rutted street. There was a worried light in his eyes. Latigo was quiet—too quiet. Tal Brady had been in his office all day, waiting. But nothing had happened. He hadn't seen Curly Jack Slade—or Dan. Tal frowned worriedly as he thought about Dan's fierce anger the night before, and what he'd said. "There's other ways of gettin' money. . . ."

Tal Brady loved his wildling kid brother, as he'd never loved anybody or anything else. When their father and mother had died five years before, leaving them equal shares in the little Anchor T ranch, Tal Brady, just back from five years of roaming, had been appointed Dan's guardian. He'd tried to keep Dan straight. But, lately, Dan Brady's hot blood had boiled over. He became involved with Curly Jack Slade's crowd—or rather, Slade had seen to it that Dan became involved.

Curly Jack Slade had showed up in Latigo several years before soon after Tal Brady had been elected marshal. Since then, he'd come into power. He owned the biggest saloon and gambling place in town. He owned two or three cow outfits in the basin, won over a poker table with a crooked deck and the backing of his gun-slicks. Curly Jack Slade had styled himself the boss of Latigo, and there were few foolish enough to dispute his claim. He was arrogant and open in his contempt for the law.

Now, Tal knew, folks were talking. They'd elected Tal Brady marshal, thinking he was the man to clean up Latigo, but things were in a worse shape than ever. They watched Slade's gunnies swagger about like they owned the town. They watched drunken cowboys lured into Slade's crooked games and cleaned. Sometimes, when they raised a row, there was a sudden gunshot, and a dead cowboy. Self-defense was always the claim. Occasionally, after one of these killings, Tal Brady would lock up one of Slade's killers. But they never stayed long in a jail cell. Tal Brady knew that folks were wondering if he'd sold out to Slade—or if he were just plain yellow.

Tal told himself it didn't matter what folks thought. But when Curly Jack Slade had started working on the kid—that mattered a hell of a lot. Tal's face had become gaunt and haggard with trying to figure out what to do. He'd pleaded with Dan, and the kid had been sullenly resentful; he'd warned Slade, and Slade had laughed.

Now, after last night, Tal Brady had to run or fight. And either course, he knew, meant bitter failure. . . .

LOOKING out the window, Tal Brady stiffened suddenly. Across the street, there was a stir of action. Two men had been moving along the board walk, in opposite directions. A wiry, graybearded oldster, and a burly, scar-faced gent who rode for one of Curly Jack Slade's outfits—Chris Slagle. The oldster, who was shuffling along the walk with lowered eyes, was Jube Turner, who owned a little cow spread near town.

Tal Brady, watching, saw Slagle jostle roughly against old Jube Turner. The oldster looked up, said something, then started on along the walk. But the burly gunman blocked his way.

"Accident, hell!" Tal Brady heard Slagle say belligerently. "You meant to bump into me. You damn two-bit ranchers are gettin' too uppity, crowdin' honest gents into the street. You seedy ol' coot, I oughta give you a workin' over!"

The bent old body straightened. Jube Turner's voice rose shrilly. "I'm onto yore game, Chris Slagle! I know you're Curly Jack Slade's poodle, but that don't scare me. And it don't give such scum as you the right to shove me into the street!"

"Sassy, huh?" Slagle snarled nastily. "You ol' goat, I aim to teach you some manners!"

Chris Slagle's fist lashed out and drove into the oldster's face, hurling him to the street. Stunned, Jube Turner rolled over, swayed to his knees, spitting blood and dust from his mouth. His face was gray with rage as he grabbed for his gun.

Chris Slagle had been standing spread-legged, grinning coldly down at the oldster. Now his hand moved, there was a spurt of gunflame and smoke, and old Jube Turner wilted down slowly into the dust again, unfired gun in his hand. Still grinning, Chris Slagle holstered his gun, turned and started back along the walk.

As the gunshot boomed out, Tal Brady had already leaped out the door and was running across the street. Instantly, he had sensed what was about to happen. He knew Jube Turner was dead. Cold fury churned in his eyes.

"Just a minute, Slagle!" he said flatly.

Chris Slagle stopped. He looked at marshal Tal Brady, his amused grin turning to a sneer.

"Well?" he asked.

Tal Brady paced on up to the killer. His arms were loose at his sides. But Slagle must have sensed something deadly in his attitude. His burly shoulders hunched forward, and his stubby fingers splayed over gunbutts.

"Well, Mister," Slagle said truculently, "what is it?"

"This!" Tal Brady hissed, and his bony fist exploded with all the weight of his muscular body behind it against Slagle's bewhiskered chin.

The savage blow smashed Chris Slagle to the ground. By the time he regained his senses Tal Brady had disarmed him and was hustling him along the street toward the jail. He shoved the dazed, cursing killer into a cell, locked the door and went back to the street.

A small crowd had gathered about Jube Turner's body. They looked at Tal Brady with new respect in their eyes as he approached. Some of them asked questions. But Tal said nothing. He turned the body over to the town coroner, then went back to his office. The bitter light had deepened in his eyes, that certainty of ultimate defeat had deepened in his heart. Now, he knew, Curly Jack Slade would be coming to see him.

AND he was right. It was an hour later when he saw Slade come from the gaudy-fronted saloon down the street and come toward the marshal's office. There was an easy, confident swing to Slade's lithe body as he strolled along. His fancy boots gleamed in the sunshine, his cream Stetson was pushed back from his curly yellow hair.

Tal Brady didn't get up from his chair as Curly Jack came into the office. Curly Jack draped a leg carelessly across a corner of the desk, looked smilingly at Tal Brady.

"Now that you've had your little joke, Brady," Curly Jack said softly, "you can turn Chris Slagle out."

"I don't see any joke," Tal said slowly. "And Slagle won't either, when he feels a rope about his neck."

"Like that, huh?" Curly Jack asked mockingly. "Since when is it against the law for a man to defend himself? A dozen men saw Jube Turner go for his gun first. You saw it yourself, if you were watching."

"I saw it," Tal Brady nodded. "All the same, it was murder. Why beat about the bush, Slade? For some rea-

son, you wanted old Jube Turner killed. Chris Slagle got the job. The fact that he forced Turner into drawing first, doesn't keep it from being cold-blooded murder."

Curly Jack Slade was still smiling. "So what?"

"So I locked Slagle up. He'll be tried, according to law. Until then he stays in a cell!"

"Have you gone crazy, Brady?"

Tal shook his head bleakly, and said, "I'm just through bein' a yellow dog. I'm not fool enough to think I can gain anything by fighting you. I know I won't have a chance. All the same—Chris Slagle stays in jail!"

Curly Jake Slade said nothing for a moment. He reached into a pocket of his gaudy jacket, took out several slips of paper.

"Maybe these will make you change your mind," he said, and held the pieces of paper before Tal Brady's eyes.

Tal Brady didn't change expression, but he felt like a chill wind had fanned him. The slips were I.O.U.s, totaling $3000, and signed by Dan Brady. Tal knew they weren't phony. He fought to hold his voice steady when he spoke.

"Why didn't you mention these last night?"

Curly Jack shrugged. "I thought they might come in handy—later. I've had them a couple of weeks. I'm a little low on cash, and I might call on the kid just any time for my money. If he couldn't make these good, and you wouldn't, it might go pretty hard with Dan Brady. You savvy that, don't you?"

"I savvy that," Tal Brady nodded, his lips stiff and white. "And Slagle stays in jail. Maybe, by now, you can savvy that!"

Curly Jack Slade quit smiling. Cat-cruelty leaped into his slitted eyes. "I savvy you're a plain damn fool!" he snapped. Then, suddenly, Curly Jack was smiling with smooth suavity again, but the cruel, mocking light stayed in his eyes. "But I'm willin' to overlook all this, to forget about what you did last night, about you jailin' Chris Slagle. I savvy you just forgot a lot of things—for instance, a gent that used to be called Tonto Pete Morgan!"

Tal Brady shook his head. "I hadn't forgotten that, Slade," he intoned. "I know I'll never be able to forget it, while we both live. I've been expecting you to mention it, to threaten me with it, to make me crawl on my belly before you, as you have for the last two years. Oh, I know I didn't have to crawl, Slade—but I thought, at first, that I could play your game and retain some of my self-respect at the same time. I know now I was wrong. I've closed my eyes to your lawlessness, to your stealing, killing, robbing. I've been worse even than you, if such a thing is possible. And now—I'm right back where I started!

"That's what you mean, isn't it, Slade? Unless I do as you say, you'll tell folks that marshal Tal Brady is really an outlaw, with a price on his head, that he was known up in Montana a few years ago as Tonto Pete Morgan. You'll send me to the pen. Is that right?"

Curly Jack Slade laughed softly. "That's right," he said. "But I'd hate to do that. It'd be hard on that kid finding out you're not really the tin god you've made him believe you are. I don't think I'll have to do that, though. You changed your mind yet about turnin' Chris Slagle loose?"

Tal Brady's face was gray, his eyes haggard, but defiant.

He said tautly, "No, I haven't changed my mind!"

Curly Jack Slade got to his feet. With a soft white hand he flicked a speck of dust from his dark velvet trousers. "Then you've got just five hours to change it," he said. "Till eight o'clock, tonight. I'll be at my cabin, if you want to see me."

Curly Jack turned and went out onto the street. Tal Brady watched him go, a leaden, hopeless feeling in his heart. He knew Curly Jack wasn't bluffing. He had it in his power to ruin Dan Brady, to put Tal Brady in the pen, and he'd do those things.

AS HE sat there, Tal Brady cursed the wanderlust that had driven him for five years. That was one reason, now, that he could excuse Dan's wildness. A few years ago, Tal Brady's thirst for excitement had driven him beyond the law. He'd been known as Tonto Pete Morgan and ridden for two years with Butch Trone's owlhoot gang up in Montana. His picture was put on some reward flyers. It was only after news of his father's death that he had returned home when he realized how crazy he'd been. He'd sworn to go straight, and to keep his kid brother, Dan, on the right trail.

Somehow, somewhere, Curly Jack Slade had come across one of those reward notices. And he'd used his knowledge to advantage. Not for his own sake, but for Dan's, Tal Brady had played Slade's game. But now matters had taken a crazy turn. Instead of saving the kid, the weapon that Slade held over Tal's head had driven Dan Brady to the brink of ruin.

An hour passed, and Tal Brady didn't get up from his chair. He was worried about Dan's absence, plagued by indecision. He knew he'd done a crazy thing in defying Curly Jack Slade. But it was too late to back down now.

The sun arced lower, and the frame buildings cast shadows across the street. Latigo was quiet, still, as if waiting for something to happen. . . .

Suddenly, a gunshot crashed out. Tal Brady jerked to his feet, went out onto the street. Somewhere down the street, a man was yelling stridently. Several men were running along the street, toward the bank building. Tal heard a quick drum of hoofs, but the running horse was somewhere out of sight.

Tal ran along the street, entered the bank. The grotesquely sprawled figure of wiry, gray-haired Jim Tate, the bank president, lay on the floor, a bullet through his heart. Baldwin, the paunchy cashier, stiff-lipped with fear, was trying to tell what had happened.

"A slender gent," Baldwin gibbered. "He came in through the back door, just as we were about to close for the day, as Jim was carrying the last of the money to the vault. He had a gun in his hand, and a black hood over his head and shoulders. He told us to raise our hands. But Jim told him to go to hell, and made a dive for that desk drawer over there where there's a gun. Then this masked gent let him have it, grabbed up the bundles of money Jim had dropped, and went out through the back door. He must have had a horse out there in the alley."

"Did you recognize him?" Tal Brady asked tersely.

The paunchy cashier shook his head. "There was something familiar about his voice, but I can't place it. No, I don't know who it was, unless I heard his voice again."

"Did anybody see him ride away?" Tal asked.

Nobody had seen the hooded rider. Tal went to the inert body, turned it over. Jim Tate was stone dead. Several loose banknotes lay on the floor beside him. And, on the floor where it had been concealed by Tate's body, Tal Brady found something else—something that made his heart feel like an icy band had suddenly clamped about it.

Quickly, Tal Brady took the object from the floor, slipped it into his pocket. There was a stunned, bewildered feeling in his brain as he

straightened. His gaze flicked over the faces of the dozen men who had come into the bank. Neither Curly Jack Slade, nor any of his henchmen, were there.

Tal Brady went toward the door.

"What about the bandit?" somebody asked. "Don't you aim to organize a posse—don't you aim to get the yella skunk that murdered Jim Tate?"

"I'll get him—but I'll handle it in my own way," Tal Brady said flatly.

Tal Brady seemed to be reeling a little as he went out the door and along the street to his office. In the office, he dropped into a chair beside the desk, and his head fell across his out-stretched arms. But, after a while, he straightened and took from his pocket the object he'd found on the bank floor beside the dead body of old Jim Tate.

A gold luck piece, etched on one side with a picture of a coiled snake. . . .

TAL BRADY sat there and stared miserably into space. The kid had robbed that bank—he'd killed Jim Tate. Finding that luck piece there couldn't mean anything else. "There's other ways of gettin' money," Dan Brady had said. Everything tallied. Dan, desperate for money to pay off Curly Jack Slade, had turned robber and killer. The knowledge sickened Tal Brady.

Remorse rode him hard. Somehow, in trying to save Dan, he'd bungled. He hadn't known anything about raising a button. Maybe he'd gone about it in the wrong way. But now it was too late to think about that. What hurt was the knowledge that the kid, instead of being just wild and reckless, was bad to the core.

Maybe, Tal Brady thought, it was all his fault. Maybe, if he hadn't been so preachy, this wouldn't have happened. Anyway, what right did a gent who had been known as Tonto Pete, whose picture was on reward flyers, have to judge anybody? Tal hunched lower in his chair, trying to plan a way out.

A buzz of sound lay over Latigo, and riders, attracted by news of the robbery and killing, galloped into town. Tight knots of men stood along the street, talking. Tal Brady could guess what they were saying, what they were thinking. But that didn't seem important now. The sun went down, and shadows crept among the frame buildings. Tal Brady didn't make a light. He sat there as dusk deepened to darkness, trying to bring some reason out of the chaos in his brain.

He had until eight o'clock, Slade had said, to change his mind. It was almost that time now, For a while, thoughts of Dan had crowded Curly Jack Slade out of his mind. The bitterness deepened in Tal's heart. Slade was at the back of all this. Slade had forced Tal Brady to do the things he'd done. Slade had driven the kid to desperation, made him rob a bank and kill a man. Now he was prodding Tal Brady, still further.

Tal looked down at the badge on his vest. At first, he'd been fiercely proud of that badge. Lately, since he'd been crawling before Curly Jack Slade, he had a feeling of shame every time he looked at it. Slade had laughed at the badge, sneered at it, and told Tal Brady to turn Chris Slagle loose. Turning Slagle loose, Tal knew, would be like turning a mad wolf out of a cage. But Curly Jack Slade was worse even than Slagle. He'd ruined two lives—Tal Brady's and the kid's.

Tal looked at a clock on the desk. Five minutes till eight. . . .

Tal Brady arose, went out onto the street. Light speared from doors and windows, making yellow patterns in the dust. Then the lights were behind him and he was pacing along the dark,

shallow gulch. He made no effort at secrecy as he approached Curly Jack Slade's cabin and knocked on the door.

CURLY JACK opened the door. He smiled mockingly as he saw Tal Brady, stood aside for him to come into the room. Tal stopped just inside the door. His face was gray, tight, but his eyes were coldly calm as he looked about the room. Cotton Orde, Tip Scanlon and Brant Schull sat at the table. But they weren't playing poker now. Tal knew they'd been expecting him.

"So you changed your mind, eh?" Curly Jack asked.

"Yeah, I've changed my mind," Tal Brady agreed slowly. "In more ways than one. Slade, have you seen Dan lately?"

"Why do you want him?" Slade asked slyly.

"That's my business," Tal clipped. "Have you seen him?"

"Maybe I have," Curly Jack Slade said mockingly. "And maybe I know why you want to see him. It wouldn't have anything to do with that bank robbery and killing, would it?"

Hot anger surged over Tal Brady, but he didn't change expression. Slade knew that Dan Brady had robbed the bank—but how he knew, Tal couldn't guess. Maybe Slade had goaded the kid into it.

"Slade," Tal Brady said, very softly, "you're a low-down, yella dog! Not satisfied with cheatin' Dan Brady out of his money, with makin' a booze-guzzlin' weakling out of him, you forced him into that bank robbery and killing. Just as if you'd held a gun in his back, you made him do it!"

"And how is knowing that going to help you?"

"It won't help me," Tal admitted. "It's too late for anything to help me. But maybe it will help the kid. Just because he went outside the law once, doesn't mean he'd do it again—that doesn't mean he's rotten. This might teach him a lesson. I think he'd go straight now, if he had a chance. And I aim to see that he gets that chance!"

"Just how do you aim to manage that?" Curly Jack purred.

"This way!" Tal Brady snapped, and leaped aside as he grabbed for his gun.

He killed Tip Scanlon first, because he knew that the gaunt, dull-eyed gunman was the most deadly of the four. Then guns were in the hands of the other three. They were roaring, and red streamers of flame and smoke were leaping out at him. A bullet stung his side. Another seared across his thigh. Shadowy, savage-eyed figures danced and gyrated before his eyes. For a moment raging tumult filled the room. Gunfire bellowed deafeningly, writhing tongues of flame interlaced, bullets snarled waspishly. Tal Brady watched tow-headed Cotton Orde wilt to the floor. He braced himself against the pain and sickness that were surging through him, knowing that in his gun there was but one more cartridge. Curly Jack Slade and Brant Schull were still on their feet. They were peering at him with eager, vicious eyes through the gunsmoke.

Then, all at once, Tal was aware of an amazing thing. Another gun was pounding over to his left. He looked in that direction. What he saw caused him to shake his head dazedly. A door over there that led into a back room, had been flung open. And in the opening stood a lithe, tousled-haired figure — Dan Brady! The gun in Dan's hand was kicking and roaring, its scarlet-tipped muzzle turned toward Brant Schull and Curly Jack Slade. Slade and Brant Schull had whirled, amazement stamped on their cruel, evil features.

Then the gunfire raged furiously again. Tal saw Dan Brady stagger

back against the door-jamb, steady himself and raise his gun. Brant Schull went down, wallowing like an enormous hog on the floor. Then, deliberately, Tal Brady raised his gun and pulled trigger. Dan shot Curly Jack Slade at the same time, and he went down as if a mighty blow had struck him.

Curly Jack, Tip Scanlon and Cotton Orde were dead. Brant Schull was still alive, but he couldn't last long.

Tal and young Dan Brady stood there and looked at each other through curling gun-fog. Dan's eyes were red-rimmed, but he was smiling a little as he looked at Tal Brady.

"Kid," Tal rasped, "you shouldn't have butted into this. You've got to get outa here, quick!"

"Why should I get outa here?" Dan demanded. "There's somethin' I want to know, before I do anything else. What's all this talk about me robbin' a bank and killin' a man?"

Tal stared, unbelievingly. The puzzlement in the kid's eyes was real. Something was wrong. Quick hope surged over Tal Brady.

"You mean, you didn't rob the bank this evening—you didn't kill old Jim Tate?"

"Comin' from you, that's a hell of a question," Dan said tautly. He went on, a little shame-facedly, "If I did them things, it was in my sleep. I've been right there in that back room all evening, asleep—drunk, to tell the truth. I did what you told me not to, Tal. Early this morning I came up here to Slade's cabin. We got to drinkin', and I must have passed out. Or maybe I was doped. Anyhow, I woke up just a few minutes ago. I heard you talkin' in here, heard what was said about me robbin' a bank and killin' somebody. But I haven't got that skunky yet. What's it all about?"

Quickly, Tal Brady told him about the robbery and murder, about how he'd found Dan Brady's luck piece on the floor beside the dead body. "If you say you didn't do it, I believe you," he finished. "But how did that luck piece get there?"

A stir of movement on the floor drew their eyes to Brant Schull. The fat killer's eyes were open, and he motioned for them to come closer. They stooped over him. He coughed up blood before he spoke.

"I heard what you said," Schull whispered weakly. "I know I'm through, and I don't want to die with any more on my soul than I can help. The kid never pulled that robbery, Brady. It was Tip Scanlon. Slade framed the kid, hopin' it would make you see things his way. He doped the kid's whiskey this mornin', and dumped him into the back room. Then, this evening, Slade sent Tip Scanlon up there to rob the bank, and told him to leave the button's luck piece where it would be found. But Slade didn't count on—this. He—he over-played his hand—for the first time. . . ."

A moment later, Brant Schull was dead. Tal and Dan straightened, just as a dozen men, drawn up the gulch by the gunfire, crowded into the room. They stared in amazement at the inert bodies on the floor, at the blood-covered figures of Dan and Tal Brady.

"Marshal, did you do all of this?" somebody asked.

"No, not all of it," Tal Brady said softly, his hand on Dan's shoulder. "The kid, here, helped. Only he's man-sized now, and square as they come. From here on he's my deputy. Between us, we'll keep the law in Latigo!"

And, looking at the kid's smile and the new, proud light in his eyes, Tal Brady knew that it was true.

The End

OLD TOUGHY

By S. OMAR BARKER

I'M jest an ol' cowpuncher, an' I kinder drag my tail,
But I used to be a curly wolf up on the Texas trail.
My knees have squoze the saddle when the herd was on the run,
My nose has sniffled powder smoke from both ends of a gun.

I'VE blowed in with the tumbleweeds to rooster up the town,
An' blowed out totin' bullets when the smoke had settled down.
I've mav'ricked orejanners an' I've rode a borried hoss
Without the kind permission of its owner or its boss.

I'VE peeled my share of broncos in the slick an' in the rough,
But shook no hands with gran'maw when they kettled up too tough.
I've swum into the river when the herd begun to mill,
An' come out full of water that was mighty hard to spill.

THE owl ain't never hooted that I wouldn't sass him back,
An' I've et so much hog-boozem that I made a forked track.
I've whittle-whanged an' fiddled till you couldn't rest in hell;
I've shore raised lots of racket for a little-clappered bell!

I'VE wore such heavy hardware that I growed a kidney sore,
An' drawed it plenty pronto in them salty days of yore.
I've cut the big gut plenty an' I've scratched the boss's itch—
So tough I've hunted grizzly bears with nothin' but a switch!

I WAS a curly wolf with cactus in my tail,
But all my wild an' woolly days both up an' down the trail,
There's jest one bull I never whacked, one chance I never took:
Been close enough to hell to smoke—*but never cussed a cook!*

SMART JIGGER

By

JOHN BENNET

The wise old owlhooter said, "Any dog that'll fetch a bone will take a bone!" But did the smart little jigger savvy such lingo?

Now came a part of the nefarious task that was really ticklish — getting himself across the windowsill and inside without making a sound.

THERE had been two of the outlaw Ranes. Cousins, they were, Big Irby and Little Irby, and already Big Irby had met his master in the rugged art of gun-slinging. Left alone, the young cousin—just twenty, small and slim, decidedly blonde, with the innocent look of a milk-bottle Willie concealing the disposition and morals of a hydrophobiated rattlesnake—became inordinately ambitious. No single sidekicker for him any more. He wanted a gang under him.

To gather such a band meant endless riding and endless weeding out. He thought then of the Old Jim Odom gang. It had taken five years for the law to whittle them down from nine to six members. This half-dozen was tried, true and wise; they knew, from one end to the other, every owlhoot trail in the state. Odom himself was getting along in years—fifty, at least, and Little Irby thought it shouldn't be so difficult to dispossess Old Jim and take charge.

So he buckled on his fast pair of double-action, hawkbill-handled .41 Colts, swung himself up to the hurricane deck of his raw-boned paint, and set out to look for the Odom gang.

When he found them, they were in camp at a desert waterhole. Night had just fallen. He rode his weary pony boldly into the circle of firelight, and hailed them in a voice deceptively mild.

"Como 'sta, amigos! Hiyah! Yo're lookin' now at Little Irb Rane. Heard o' me, I reckon?"

None of the six was under forty. They were gaunt and grizzled, sunbitten, and Odom wore a full beard. Each had a worn, old six-gun within arm's length. They sat here and there about the fire, some of them smoking. Odom and his right bower, Idaho

Spivy, exchanged glances. It was Idaho who responded to the newcomer's greeting.

"Yeah, bad kid, we shore have heard a heap about you all along the owlhoot, as who hasn't. Not all we heerd was good, bad kid."

"No?" Little Irb got nimbly out of his saddle and flung down the rein, then smiled his deceptive smile. To save him, he couldn't help boasting: "Fellas, listen. There ain't no hombre in this country which can throw lead with me and walk off on his own feet when it's over."

Old Jim drawled: "They do say yo're a fine shot with both hands. 'Specially ef yore target happens to be a man's back."

"I never shot nobody in the back!" flared the bad kid.

"All I know is what I heered." The grizzled outlaw chief shrugged. "I don't never argy, son. Not that we ain't sawta bad hombres ourselves. But at that, we has our code. Them we has to shoot, is allus shot from the front. We don't stick up people who cain't afford to be stuck up. That's why we've lost but three men in the years we been ridin' owlhoot—John Law, y'see, son, he ain't quite so down on us as he'd be ef we hadn't kept to that there code I jest mentioned. Well—"

Old Jim shrugged again, and half smiled, then went on: "From the direction you comes ridin' in, kid, I take it you most likely passed through Gold Rock City to git here. Wonder Sid Parrott didn't nail you!"

"I'm a stranger in this section," Little Irb said. "Who the hell is Sid Parrott, anyhow?"

"He's the Gold Rock sheriff, and he's a smart jigger—and I mean smart," said Odom. "Er, we'd heerd that Big Irb was dead, kid. You got some idea o' joinin' up with this outfit o' mine, mebbe?"

Rane smiled his innocent, boyish smile. "Why, yeah, I wanted to. Jim. I ain't no lone lobo. That ain't true, about me drillin' somebody in the back. Honest, it ain't. All sawts o' tales has been told on me. It's even been told that I robbed a lone little rancher woman!"

He'd shot not one man from behind, but three. He hadn't merely robbed the woman rancher. She had revealed the hiding place of her meagre savings only after Little Irb had kept her tied in a chair for two hours and was threatening to carry off one of her small children. But the Odom band knew nothing of this.

Rane was a smooth and convincing talker. When he had been at this desert hideout for three days, only Old Jim himself had all his wits about him. One by one the others had come to believe in the bad kid. Old Jim saw it with eyes that were sad. But he made no mention of the matter, which was like him. He was too old to be influenced by smooth talk.

Then Little Irb threw out a feeler, addressing Idaho Spivy alone. Wasn't Odom past the age of usefulness as a leader? Wasn't he too careful? Gave too much attention to his so-called "code," didn't he? Why, even the grub supply was running low, and there wasn't any money. Regretfully, Idaho agreed with Little Irb.

JUST at sundown of the next day, a man rode into the outlaws' camp—a lean, hatchet-faced hombre whom Rane had never seen before. He dismounted, and spoke in a squeaky drawl. "Hiyah, Jim. Hiyah, Idyho. Hiyah, everybody. Say, who's the purty kid?"

"Little Irb Rane," Idaho Spivy said. "Heerd o' him, ain't you, Ben?"

"Why, shore!" exclaimed Ben Sutters. "Hope to tell you! With you now?"

"Yeah, reckon he is, Ben."

"Well," the newcomer said, "me, I'd think all you got to do is sawta hold him down, and you'll have a pippin.

He shoots like a Gatling with each hand, I been told."

Sutters glanced admiringly toward Little Irb, and turned to Odom.

"Jim, I've tipped you off to a good thing, time or two, and I got somethin' for you now. The lock on the Gold Rock City bank vault is outa fix, though nobody much knows it, and they've set two men to guardin' the vault door, and during these hot nights a window is left open at the front and one at the back—can y' beat that?—why, it's jist made to order! All you got to do is ride into town after folks is asleep, stick up the two guards and help yoreselves to cash. A quawter for me outa each dollar you gits ain't astin' too much, is it, Jim, d'ye think?"

Odom frowned. "Steep enough. But it shore sounds like a cinch, Ben. Now you better be high-tailin' it back to Gold Rock afore yo're missed there, hadn't you? Sid Parrott's no fool, Ben."

"Y'betcha he ain't no fool," drawled Sutters.

The next moment he was gone. Little Irb Rane laughed cockily.

"Odom, that's a one-man job." It was Rane's chance to prove himself. "Looky. After midnight, them two vault guards is shore to take turns sleepin'. I can crawl up on the one which ain't asleep, knock him out quiet with a .41 barrel, then knock out the other one the same way, and that's all they'll be to it. Don't need a gang. Odom, want to lay me a bet?"

Old Jim's eternally squinted eyes were mere slits. His men sided with the bold kid, he knew very well. A minute passed before he spoke.

"Son, I've got nothin' to bet, 'cept my hawss and saddle and guns, and I shore won't bet them. Now you listen to me, son. You don't know Sheriff Sid Parrott. Told you he was one smart jigger, didn't I?"

"The very kind I like to go up against," Rane said quickly.

He turned and went to the other side of the water-hole to get his paint and saddle it. Idaho Spivy was the next to speak.

"Jim, old-timer, you shorely ain't lost yore nerve, have you?"

"Why, mebbe not, Ide. I been doin' a heap o' tall thinkin', Ide." Jim Odom glanced across the murky water-hole and to the busy, bad kid, and lowered his voice a trifle: "Pardner, they is facts which stays facts, don't matter how you looks at 'em, and one of em is this here. Any dog that'll fetch a bone will take a bone."

His subdued tones nothwithstanding, Little Irb Rane caught that. Rane jerked around angrily. Each of his slim, quick hands was read to go for a fast, hawkbill, .41 Colt.

"Talkin' about me, huh?" he half snarled. "Any dog that'll fetch a bone will take one, huh? Meanin' jest what, *viejo?*"

"Figger it out," Odom said calmly. He went on: "Now, son, listen. You pass up that there bank business. It's not a job for one man, like you think. It's a bigger job than that, a sight bigger. You—"

Rane's pale-blue killer eyes gleamed as he cut in harshly: "Spivy is right. Yore nerve is gone, Jim. If it ain't, then what about this. Said you didn't have nothin' to bet 'cept yore hawss and saddle and guns, didn't you? Wrong. If I bring back that bank money, will you turn the leader job o' this gang over to me?"

"No!" barked Odom. "Kid, don't you tackle that!"

The kid laughed a flinty laugh. His gaze flicked over the faces of those who always had been faithful to Old Jim. "What did I tell you, hombres?" he crowed. "What did I tell you?"

Solemnly they shook their heads, and Little Irb knew that if he came back with the bank *dinero* he would be voted into the leader job.

Soon afterward, when the bad kid was riding buoyantly eastward, Idaho

Spivy observed, to his bearded chieftain: "The more you ast Irb not to tackle it, the more set he was on it. Notice that, Jim?"

Somewhat to Idaho's surprise, Jim Odom laughed.

"Ide," he said, "mebbe I knowed what I was doin'! Yeah—I wanted him to go. Matter o' self-defense for us all, pardner. That damn little desert sidewinder, he can make you think black is white ef only you'll listen to him, and you and the other boys shore did. Any dog that'll fetch a bone—but I already said that. A little later, you and me will ride into Gold Rock and hang around in the dark and see what happens. Hafta be keerful though, because we've not been there fer a long time, and the town's built fast lately and we might git sawta tangled up. Now le's have some grub, Ide."

Idaho Spivy kindled a supper fire. . . .

LITTLE Irb Rane had decided that it would be better if Ben Sutters didn't know he was going alone to stick up the bank vault guards, so he kept well behind Sutters on the way to town.

He arrived at eleven o'clock that night and haunted the deepest shadows while he waited for the last saloon to close. Then he left his pony under black live oaks in the edge of the business section, and soundlessly slipped here and there getting the lay of things. There was no moon. No light showed anywhere. The town was bigger than he had thought. He was the better part of an hour in finding, above the main doorway of an almost new brick building, these words in dim white—GOLD ROCK CITY BANK.

Ben Sutters had said two windows were open for air, one at the front and one at the rear. Rane located the open front window, knelt nearby in the darkness and for twenty minutes did nothing but breathe, watch and listen. This killer kid was very cautious, this robber of a poor, lone little ranch woman. If he fell down on the present job—but he wouldn't. Never had fallen down on any job, had he?

At last his ears detected what seemed to be a light snore. He smiled a hard and narrow smile.

Now came a part of the nefarious task that was really ticklish—getting himself across the windowsill and inside without making a sound, and without showing his slender body against the lesser darkness of the street.

He inched his way like a marauding snake and congratulated himself upon the result. Again he indulged in a hard and narrow smile. Sheriff Sid Parrott was a smart jigger, was he? Well, he'd show him. On his knees and one hand—the other hand was carrying a ready .41 double-action Colt—Rane moved soundlessly across the floor. He came to a wall, followed it stealthily to a doorway, crept through and stopped to listen. Next, he must locate the guard who was awake. If only the hombre would cough, or sneeze, or light a cigarette. . . . Now all was still, so deathly still. Strange fear began to gnaw at the yellow soul of Little Irb. He crept a few yards farther in the blackness.

Another doorway yawned, this one at his left. He found it with his free hand, did not see it. In there, perhaps. . . .

He crept through that doorway. Suddenly he was aware of a human presence very near to him, or thought he was aware of it. The fear that was gnawing at him became stark. The door behind him closed with a queer noise, and he shot to his feet with a .41 hawkbill in both slim hands.

"What the hell—" he chattered, as a light illuminated the outer room.

Another light glowed from somewhere in the rear. In the kid's ears

rang a laugh of cold triumph. Coldly triumphant words followed:

"All right, owlhooter baby! You sure won't get a bite to eat nor a drop to drink until you poke them two waspy little guns out to me!"

Rane's pale-blue eyes adjusted themselves quickly to the semi-darkness about him. He wasn't in any bank building. Not a bit of it. He hadn't stolen only into the Gold Rock City jail but into a cell—was locked in it—having played into Sheriff Sid Parrott's hands even more fully than that officer had hoped for!

The sheriff's voice came on, and he didn't bother to pitch it low.

"To tell you the truth, kid, I didn't have any very great reason to believe the Odom outfit would be fooled by that moving the bank sign over to a place above the main door of the new jail building, because I figured Old Jim would be too careful. Well, I reckon I've got no kick coming. I'd just as lief have you as that whole gang!"

Little Irb swore a red streak as it all became plain to him. Ben Sutters had turned stool pigeon, and had told Parrott that he, Rane, was riding with Odom. Old Jim hadn't been talking about him, Rane, when he'd said that a dog that fetched a bone would take one—he had meant Ben Sutters! All at once, he heard from a short distance off in the darknes, a laugh of mingled triumph and derision, and a drawled taunt.

"Haw, haw, haw; yah, yah, yah!" Of course, it was Jim Odom. "Did I tell you, desert rattlesnake kid, which shoots hombres in the back—did I tell you that Sid Parrott was a smart jigger, or didn't I?"

Parrott laughed too, Parrott and his hidden deputies. Then there was a staccato flurry of hoofbeats, those of Odom's and Spivy's horses, fading rapidly. The Gold Rock City sheriff shrugged, gave no order for pursuit. Catch that pair in the darkness, with the start the pair had? He wouldn't even try.

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Adventurers All

Sea Lions and an Alaskan Storm

MENTION of sea lions will always remind me of a stormy trip into Valdez, Alaska, in a small boat early May, 1937, when two others and I staked our claims for a choice spot in Davy Jones' Locker, but luckily did not have to prove up on them.

"Do you want to get a whopper of a newsreel story?" queried Wayne, all full of enthusiasm when I met him that cold, wind-swept March day in 1937 on the snow-covered runway of the Valdez airfield. Just arrived from Fairbanks via the Black Rapids glacier in a Gillam Airways plane, I was at the moment unloading my newsreel camera, film and other equipment on to the hard-packed snow. Lifting out my last armload of equipment, I turned and looked Wayne in the eye. He knew darn well that if there was a good newsreel story in any part of Alaska I would want to get it, I thought to myself, and to him I said, "You bet!"

But it was early May before I got a chance to go looking for the sea lions and when I then returned to Valdez in the same plane the spring break-up of ice on rivers around Fairbanks was due in a few days. Because these trips to Valdez were brief leaves of absence from my regular job as cameraman with a Hollywood movie party culminating its work with pictures of the break-up, it was imperative that I return to Fairbanks so as not miss the event.

When Al Parmenter landed the Gillam plane that evening at Valdez after the three and a half hours chilly flight, it was evident that the Valdez field was fast becoming barren of snow and planes would soon need to change to wheels.

Shortly after four the next morning, Wayne, myself and Joe, the youthful owner of a 27-foot motor-boat, left Valdez in high hopes of photographing a sea lion herd some 65 miles away in Prince William Sound. In answer to enquiries about the route we were to take and the boat itself, I was assured fervently that we would be shielded from all bad storms by islands along our route, and that the boat "would carry us to hell and back." The first statement, I learned next day, had a bad flaw. The second turned out to be a bit too realistically true.

After a beautiful outbound trip past majestic Columbia glacier and snow-capped peaks we reached the sea lion rookery late that afternoon. But on that bare stretch of rocky shore which fringed the timbered island the rookery was dotted with only a few sea lions—a scant three hundred. My hopes dropped with a sickening thud. I could get no huge herd for my movie scenes, for the majority of the

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sea lions were scattered all over Prince William Sound following schools of herring. Included were the pups, now old enough to leave home.

After several runs toward the rookery in attempts to get photographs of big bulls diving off into the water, it became evident that our boat was too slow for this type of attack. The sea lions would be alarmed by the putt-putting of the motor and dive in the water much too soon. Wayne and I then followed my original plan and launched the ungainly, 16-foot rowboat to sneak up on them. We did this on the opposite side of the rookery's promontory so that we were unseen until within 200 yards of them. Joe in the motor-boat was first sent out as a decoy in another direction as a distance to attract the jittery bull's attentions.

When the bulls observed us rowing around the corner of their home, one big fellow weighing more than two tons seemed particularly displeased with our lack of etiquette. He made a bold attack at us and was kept from upsetting our boat only after much splashing of oars. If he had been tempted to charge us from beneath he could have smashed our lumbering rowboat into kindling. Recalling the case of the Indian who lost his life in a similar way while hunting sea lions for fox food a few seasons before, Wayne voted to do all our photography while on water from the deck of the motor-boat.

It was cloudy and the light was getting poor, and after pulling our skiff aboard the motor-boat we pulled into a nearby cove and anchored for the night.

The following day I stalked the cluster of huge sea lion bulls on their rocky peninsular lookout. It was interesting game, and if another movie camera could have caught me inching my way on my stomach, camera in hand, over the slippery rocks, it would have been a mighty fine comedy from the sea lions point of view. It was serious business when between those big fellows and the beach, however. And could they bite? Oh, boy! You should have seen their teeth and heard them rattle like so many sabres when the bulls shook their chunky heads. The lion-like roar from the grandfather of them all, "King Sourpuss," reverberated in awe-inspiring fashion. After three and one-half hours of crawling over this part of the rookery I determined to dash upon him for a close-up, being careful not to get between him and the sea. Shouting, I came upon him from a rocky ledge above and got some good footage of his startled look and plunge into the water.

If we had left for Valdez shortly afterward as we should have done, we would have missed the miserable consequences that followed. But we delayed our departure while Wayne tried unsuccessfully to kill a bull with his bear gun from the decks of the motor-boat. It was nearly six o'clock when we headed for Valdez, fully seven hours run away. Heavy rain clouds were beginning to move in from the southwest.

Two hours toward Valdez from the Rookery was an open stretch of water, which, unprotected by any islands, leads out to the Gulf of Alaska, a veritable funnel for all storms. It had been quiet as a millpond on our trip out the day before, and this evening showed no agitation whatsoever as we entered it to cross. I was putting aside the coffee in the little galley below when the blow came. At a shout from Joe I scrambled out on deck.

We were halfway across the inlet. Where a moment before had been unruffled peace now raged a gale that struck fear to all of us. Cascades of water seven feet high were pouring at us, driven with all the power that a sudden gulf of Alaska gale can muster. At almost the first blow, the ungainly rowboat on our deck had gone overboard, and my first sight after seeing the combers was of it trailing astern. Never built to ride out any rough water, the boat was being towed from its side due to a fouled line and its quick sinking was imminent. The landlubberly mistake had been made of hanging our motor-boat anchor on the rowboat's side. Things indeed looked black for us. Instead of a sea anchor in the right place, we had one with a line to our bow and pulling us

broadside to the waves. Worse than that, the "sea anchor" was sinking and would capsize us as it sank, providing its terrific pull on our bow bits atop our flimsy cabin did not pull the cabin off first.

The end of the rowboat's line on our bow bits was a small anchor chain. How Wayne and I freed that cabin I don't know, but we did free it just before the bow of the rowboat disappeared out of sight. Then, while I held on to a lashing on Wayne's belt with one hand and the cabin with the other he nailed down the torn hatch-cover, ripped as the rowboat was washed overboard. The after-deck had freeboard of scarcely zero, but the job was completed before we shipped too much water through the broken hatches.

This was not my first experience of storms on Alaskan waters in small boats, by any means, but never before had I been so certain that my time had come. What a hell of a lonely place in which to drown! Weeks even might pass before our absence would be reported from Valdez. Every year a few small boats are lost off the Alaskan coasts, and for a while it seemed certain that ours would be listed for 1937.

But our luck held while we painfully chugged back toward the rookery, and after an hour of fighting the storm made the lee of the first island in that direction. What a relief!

The next three days were miserably cold and damp ones as we huddled in cramped and wet bunks with a leaky roof overhead and huddled by turns about the little galley stove. Wet snow fell, the wind blew and the storm continued. But late the third day the swells had abated sufficiently to allow us to travel with bated breath around the windward side of the island for three miles to the protected anchorage and the island home of one John Beyer, native fisherman.

Here the hospitality of Beyer and his wife proved life saving and we had several warm and delicious meals and many sociable hours before their warm stove. We continued to bunk aboard our little motor-boat and after two days in the anchorage awoke to find the swells somewhat smaller in the distance. Our second trip to cross the inlet was successful and we reached Valdez late on the eighth day.

The regularly scheduled Gillam plane had left, but Gillam was persuaded to send Parmenter on a charter trip. Only a narrow patch of snow was left for our ski plane, and we barely cleared the power wires at the end of the runway. I thanked Providence that a good pilot was at the controls. My good luck was still with me.

It was with me still after Parmenter so dexterously landed on the sloppy Fairbanks field, for I learned that the ice had not yet gone out on the Tanana or Chena Rivers but was undoubtedly going to do so in a few hours. I joined the rest of the movie party and travelled by trail up the Chena River with them. Here we were all marooned for three days in a chilly camp by flood waters and a large ice jam. Fairbanks was flooded, the Gillam plane was grounded for several days, but I was in time to handle my camera for the break-up pictures!

Leonard Delano.

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Vol. XXX. No. V

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LATE AUGUST, 1938